Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Allegiance Update: 1
8. Chapter 5
9. Chapter 6
10. Chapter 7
11. Chapter 8
12. Chapter 9
13. Chapter 10
14. Chapter 11
15. Allegiance Update: 2
16. Chapter 12
17. Chapter 13
18. Chapter 14
19. Chapter 15
20. Allegiance Update: 3
21. Chapter 16
22. Chapter 17
23. Chapter 18
24. Allegiance Update: 4
25. Chapter 19
26. Chapter 20
27. Chapter 21
28. Chapter 22
29. Chapter 23
30. Chapter 24
31. Chapter 25
32. Allegiance Update: 5
33. Chapter 26
34. Chapter 27

35. Chapter 28
36. Chapter 29
37. Epilogue
38. Final Allegiances

Allegiances

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Smokedream** - Dark gray tom with pale blue eyes

Medicine cat: **Fawnwhisper** - Cream she-cat with white spots and black paws

Apprentice, Flintpaw - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Oakgaze** - Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Needlerose - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings

Apprentice, Stormpaw - Blue-gray tabby tom

Frostedwillow - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Sootblossom - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Pricklepaw - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle and black ears. Mother to Sootblossom's kit: Snakekit, a tortoiseshell she-kit with pale amber eyes. Nursing Burntkit, a dark ginger tom with lighter paws, a brown belly and a gray tail with amber eyes

Elders: **Brokenflower** - Ginger-brown she-cat with white paws and a missing leg

Lightskip - Cream-and-white she-cat

ThunderClan

Leader: **Snailstar** - Black-and-brown tom

Deputy: **Cloverwhisper** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Medicine cat: **Waspspark** - Tall gray tom with ginger spots

Warriors: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

Blazesong - Ginger she-cat with gray stripes and a white belly with green eyes

Apprentice, Kestrelpaw - Mottled cream tom

Petalmist - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

Addersnarl - Very dark ginger tom with a black stripe running down his spine

Hazelfoot - Brown tom with a white leg

Apprentice, Weaselpaw - Ginger-and-white tom

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Queens: **Silentpetal** - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail. Expecting Addersnarl's kits

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes. Expecting Hazelfoot's kits

WindClan

Leader: **Fernstar** - Gray tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: **Bearback** - Brown tom with black stripes

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Hareclaw** - Brown-and-white tom with a long tail

Flowerwing - Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Falconpaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Mossripple - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples

Violetroar - Purplish-brown she-cat

Apprentice, Dawnpaw - Ginger she-cat with white spots

Plumbreeze - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Birchwhistle - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Elders: **Bramblefrost** - Pale brown tabby tom with icy-blue eyes

RiverClan

Leader: **Frecklestar** - Brown-and-cream she-cat with black spots on her face

Deputy: **Troutpatch** - Gray tom with black dapples and green eyes

Medicine cat: **Lilacheart** - Black-and-silver tabby she-cat

Apprentice, Briarpond - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Tornfeather** - Black tom with a short tail

Swiftbrook - Gray she-cat with long legs

Apprentice, Dogpaw - Pale brown she-cat with black spots and white paws

Berryfeather - Pale ginger she-cat

Bouldershade - Black tom

Apprentice, Spottedpaw - Black she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Nettlebrook - Cream-and-white she-cat

Apprentice, Spiderpaw - Black-and-white tom with a reddish belly

Whitealder - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Elders: **Goosepath** - Gray-and-white speckled tom

Aspenfeather - Brown tom with dark ginger markings

Whitewhisker - Pale gray-and-white tom with long whiskers

Prologue

White, fluffy clouds were floating on the pale blue sky, covering the sun. Soft snowflakes were falling onto the silent pine forest, and the ground was covered in snow. There were no chirping birds, and no prey running around. The only sounds disturbing the silence were a few voices coming from the center of the pine forest.

"Ugh! There's so much snow!" A silver she-cat with gray stripes complained, looking around. "And it's so cold! Can't we go out later?"

"No, Needlerose." A dark gray tom with pale blue eyes rolled his eyes. "We have to patrol the ThunderClan border. And it doesn't matter if we patrol it now or later, the weather won't change."

Needlerose rolled her eyes, but didn't protest any longer. She followed the dark gray tom, but stopped. "Where's Sootblossom?"

"Here!" A voice called out. Needlerose turned around and saw the black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes rush toward them. "I'm sorry, but I had to check on Ebonyheart to see if she needed anything."

"Right." Needlerose growled. "Couldn't you do that later?"

"Needlerose!" The dark gray tom hissed, padding forward. "You know it's been hard for them, ever since Scorpionkit died. That poor kit, dying so suddenly and early..."

Needlerose hesitated, feeling guilty, and nodded. "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry. Scorpionkit would have made a fine warrior, but I'm sure her sister, Snakekit, will be a great warrior one day."

"Yeah." Sootblossom sighed, but then shook his head and looked at the dark gray tom. "Anyway, where are we going, Smokedream?"

"To the ThunderClan border." The tom meowed, then turned around. "Come on, follow me, both of you!"

Needlerose and Sootblossom followed Smokedream quietly through the snow-covered forest. Suddenly, Sootblossom stopped and twitched his ears.

"What is it?" Needlerose looked at him. "Did you hear something?"

"Yes, it... it sounds like a kit is mewling." Sootblossom squinted his eyes and looked around.

"There's no way." Smokedream approached them, flicking his tail. "Are you sure?"

"It's probably just the wind." Needlerose shrugged. "Now let's go!"

"No!" Sootblossom hissed. "I'm sure it's a kit, and I'm not letting it to die!" And with that, he turned and sprinted away.

"Sootblossom, wait!" Needlerose called and ran after him. She heard Smokedream's heavy paw steps behind her, and she ran faster to try and catch up with Sootblossom, but the tom was running too fast. He jumped over a fallen branch and stopped, looking down.

Needlerose jumped past the branch and stopped next to him, panting. "Are you out of your mind? There's no-"

Then, she paused and looked down. A tiny kit lay on a moss, squirming around and mewling. It was a dark ginger kit with lighter paws, a brown belly and ears, with a long, gray tail.

"It... it really is a kit." Smokedream whispered, looking at him. "What is it doing here? Where is its mother?"

"I'm not sure." Sootblossom meowed and crouched, sniffing the kit. Then, he tilted his head. "I don't recognize his scent. He's not a Clan kit."

"Let me see." Smokedream crouched and sniffed the kit, then he nodded, getting up. "I don't recognize the scent, either. He must be a loner."

"Well, where's his mother?" Needlerose asked, looking around. "She surely wouldn't have abandoned her kit during leaf-bare."

"Maybe she didn't." Sootblossom got up, shivering. "Maybe something happened to her."

"Well, what should we do with this kit, then?" Needlerose asked, looking at the kit's fragile body. "We can't just let him here!"

"No, we can't." Sootblossom nodded. "I say we should take him back to ShadowClan."

"That's a good idea." Smokedream agreed and crouched, picking up the kit slowly. The tiny kit soon started mewling louder and hitting the air with his paws.

"Calm down! I'm not going to hurt you!" Smokedream exclaimed, surprised, but the kit didn't stop.

"He must be hungry... poor kit." Needlerose whispered, sympathizing with the kit. "Come on, let's get him back to camp fast."

Smokedream nodded and turned, leading the way back. "We'll patrol the ThunderClan border after we get this kit back to the Clan."

Needlerose turned and followed the Clan deputy, Sootblossom following close behind. After a while, Smokedream entered the camp and Needlerose followed him.

The cats that were in camp were either talking to each other, eating prey, or listening to the elders. When the patrol entered the camp, they all fell silent and looked at them.

"Where's Bumblestar?" Sootblossom asked, looking around.

"Here." A sturdy and long-furred yellow tom with black stripes padded toward them. He pricked his ears as he heard the kit's mewling. "What's that? A kit?"

"Yes, Sootblossom heard it while we were on our way to patrol." Smokedream explained, holding the kit gently. "It had no Clan scent on it, and it looked abandoned, so we decided that we should bring it back to camp."

Bumblestar looked at the kit, hesitant to say something.

A cream she-cat with white spots padded forward, sniffing the kit. "Smokedream is right, I don't recognize the kit's scent."

"Well, if it's abandoned, then I think we should take him in. If his mother comes looking for him, then we'll give him back to her, although I doubt that would happen." Bumblestar meowed, then looked around. "Smokedream, take him to Ebonyheart and see if she's willing to care for him. I'll announce this to the Clan soon."

"Yes, Bumblestar." Smokedream dipped his head and turned around, padding toward the nursery. When he padded inside, he looked around longingly, remembering his times as a carefree kit, but he brushed it off. "Ebonyheart?"

"Yes? Is something wrong?" The pale gray she-cat with a white belly raised her head from her kit, who was sleeping next to her. She then blinked. "Who is that?"

"Sootblossom found this kit while we were patrolling and we brought it back, and Bumblestar said that we'll take it in, at least for now." Smokedream explained. "There's no Clan scent on him, and Bumblestar was wondering if you could take care of him?"

Ebonyheart looked at the kit, then at Snakekit. She sighed. "Not a day passes without me thinking about Scorpionkit, and how much I wish she lived. That kit won't ever replace her, but... I think he could act like a brother to Snakekit. Bring him here."

"Thank you." Smokedream sighed, relieved, and approached the queen. He gently set the kit down, and the kit stopped mewling as he soon caught the scent of milk. "What will you name him?"

Ebonyheart looked at the kit and paused when she saw his tail. "His whole body is ginger, and yet his tail is... gray. I've never seen something like that. It looks like it's burnt..." She then raised his head. "I'll name him Burntkit, I think it fits him."

Smokedream looked a bit hesitant, so Ebonyheart sighed. "No, I didn't name him that to make fun of his tail. I'm sure he'll be proud

of his name later, and his tail can fool his enemies, making them think that he can't use his tail in battles, which would make him lose his balance faster, but they would be wrong." She then licked the tiny kit. "He's going to be a good warrior one day."

Chapter 1

Burntkit bursted out of the nursery, holding his gray tail high. He looked around, then rushed toward Snakekit.

"Oh! You're finally awake!" Snakekit meowed. "I've been so bored!"

"Sorry, I guess." Burntkit shrugged, then looked at his adoptive sister. When he first opened his eyes and saw Snakekit, he was too scared to approach her, thinking she looked very intimidating. But he soon found out that she wasn't as intimidating as she looked, and now he spent most of his time with her. Burntkit purred, but then shook his head. "Well, what should we do now?"

"No idea." Snakekit murmured and looked around the camp and at the other cats. "Oh, I know! Let's go ask Stormpaw and Pricklepaw about their apprenticeship. We'll be apprenticed soon, anyway, so we should get to know our soon-to-be denmates."

"All right." Burntkit looked around and squinted his eyes, trying to find the two apprentices. He then saw them talking near the apprentices' den. "There they are!"

Snakekit turned around, and as soon as she saw the apprentices she rushed toward them, and Burntkit followed close behind her.

"Oh! Hello, kits!" Stormpaw meowed when he saw them, dipping his blue-gray head. "What are you two doing here?"

"Well, we wanted to get to know our future denmates, since we're going to be apprenticed very soon." Snakekit meowed, flicking her tail. "What's being an apprentice like?"

"Well, it's nice, I guess." Pricklepaw meowed, his yellow eyes betraying his annoyance. "We get to patrol and hunt, leave the camp, check the elders for ticks, just apprentice stuff. Now can you two leave us alone?"

Stormpaw opened his jaws to say something, but before he could do anything, Snakekit jumped up. "Nope, not leaving yet. What's the forest like? Is there a lot of prey?"

Burntkit purred in amusement, but Pricklepaw didn't seem to find her funny. "Why don't you go see for yourself?"

"Pricklepaw!" Stormpaw glared at his denmate.

"What?" Pricklepaw shrugged. "It was a suggestion."

Stormpaw rolled his eyes, then looked at Burntkit and Snakekit. "You two better not leave the camp until you're apprentices. You know the rules."

"Yeah, yeah." Snakekit rolled her eyes, and Burntkit looked at her, tilting his head. *She seems annoyed... does she actually want to leave camp?*

"Kits, come over here!" A voice called.

Burntkit turned and purred as he saw Sootblossom, his adoptive father, call them from where he was sitting by the warriors' den.

"Thank StarClan!" Pricklepaw mumbled.

Burntkit ignored him and rushed over to the tom, with Snakekit quickly following him. Burntkit sat down and looked up at the warrior. "Where have you been?"

"I was patrolling." Sootblossom answered.

Snakekit got up before the warrior could say anything else. "What's the forest like?"

Not again! Burntkit sighed, but Sootblossom didn't look annoyed. Instead, the tom purred. "Well, it looks exactly like it does from inside of the camp, just that it's a lot bigger. The grass also feels soft, and there is prey almost everywhere. Thunderpaths too..."

"Thunderpaths?" Burntkit tilted his head. "What's that?"

"I thought Ebonyheart would explain that to you by now." Sootblossom blinked, looking surprised. "Well, they're long path of stones that monsters run on. I suppose you know what these are?"

"I think so." Snakekit nodded. "But what about the other Clans? How many Clans are there, again?"

Sootblossom looked surprised. "You two are almost six moons old and don't even know the Clans?"

"We do! We just want to know more about them." Burntkit meowed. "ThunderClan, for example. What are they like?"

"Nosy." Sootblossom sighed. "They always get their nose in other cats' business. They're also known for welcoming outsiders a lot, although I don't think they have an outsider in their Clan right now."

"Oh, and RiverClan?" Snakekit asked. "They're the fish-eaters, right?"

Sootblossom chuckled. "Exactly. They eat a lot of fish and they like swimming."

Burntkit flicked his tail, curious. "And WindClan?"

"Oh, the rabbit-eaters!" Snakekit exclaimed. "They eat rabbits and run on the moor, right? Lightskip says they're very scrawny!"

"Lightskip said that?" Sootblossom looked toward the elders' den. "Well, to be honest, she's not wrong. Anyway, I have to go now, sorry kits. Smokedream said he wanted me for a patrol."

"Again?" Burntkit tilted his head.

"Well, it's not really for a patrol." Sootblossom meowed. "Our medicine cat, Fawnwhisper, left to help WindClan's medicine cat, Swangaze, with something. And Smokedream wants me to help Flintpaw gather herbs."

"That seems boring." Snakekit meowed. "I'm glad I'll be a warrior!"

"Same!" Burntkit agreed.

"Being a warrior is important, yes, but being a medicine cat is important as well." Sootblossom meowed, flicking his black-and-ginger tail. "They treat the wounded and-"

"We know, we know." Snakekit sighed. "But it seems pretty boring. At least we can fight as warriors! I'll keep every cat that wants to attack us away!" And with that, she turned around and jumped on Burntkit, pinning him down. The dark ginger kit let out a surprised shriek.

"Got you!" Snakekit laughed.

Burntkit huffed. "Get off me!"

Sootblossom purred and got up. "I'll let you two play, then. See you later!"

"Bye!" Snakekit meowed, then looked back at Burntkit. She then started pawing him playfully. "Get out of my territory, Burntstar! This is SnakeClan's territory, and we won't give any to you!"

Burntkit's ears twitched with delight. "But BurntClan needs territory, Snakestar!" He playfully meowed, pushing Snakekit off of him.

Snakekit got up, shaking her fur. "No, you don't! You're just selfish cats that want more territory!"

"Not true!" Burntkit meowed, but before he could do anything, Ebonyheart rushed towards them.

"Kits, kits! What are you two doing?" She asked in a panic.

"We were just playing." Snakekit told her.

"Yeah! I'm Burntstar of BurntClan, and she's Snakestar of SnakeClan. We're fighting for more territory!" Burntkit meowed, flicking his tail proudly. "And I'm winning!"

"No you're not!" Snakekit hissed and threw herself at him, pinning

him down and keeping her ginger paws on his shoulders. "Well, I won!"

"Not fair!" Burntkit growled.

Ebonyheart purred and gently nudged Snakekit off of Burntkit. "You two will be great warriors one day. And, maybe leader and deputy. Who knows?"

"Well, I'll be ShadowClan's leader one day! Just you wait!" Snakekit looked up. "And I might make Burntkit deputy, but I'm unsure."

"Hey!" Burntkit hissed, getting up. "You're wrong, I will be the leader, not you!"

"Will not!" Snakekit looked at him.

"Will!" Burntkit meowed.

"All right, all right, stop." Ebonyheart meowed, placing her pale gray paw between them. "Only time will tell. Now come on, it's time for you two to sleep."

"Already?" Snakekit sighed annoyedly. "But we just woke up!"

"Yeah, I'm not tired!" Burntkit complained.

Ebonyheart purred. "Come on. When you two will be apprentices, you're going to wish you could sleep more."

"Well, I, for one, won't!" Snakekit meowed. "I'll be ShadowClan's best warrior, I'll hunt and patrol a lot and I won't get tired at all!"

"No, I will!" Burntkit meowed. "I'll never get tired!"

"All right, stop it." Ebonyheart purred. "Just come on."

"All right, Ebonyheart." Snakekit sighed and padded after her mother, who was already walking toward the nursery. Burntkit quickly followed them.

Well, me and Snakekit will be the best warriors ShadowClan has ever

seen! Our Clan will always be safe with us as warriors!

Chapter 2

"Burntkit, wake up!"

"Huh?" Burntkit yawned and opened his eyes, only to see Snakekit peering down at him. "What do you want? Is it even dawn yet?"

"Shush, be quiet!" Snakekit whispered, looking at Ebonyheart, who was still sleeping. "Come on, I wanted to leave the camp today!"

"What?" Burntkit blinked, suddenly fully awake. "Are you out of your mind? We aren't allowed to!"

"Well, Sootblossom made the forest sound so great yesterday, and now I'm too curious not to go. Come on!" Snakekit whispered and turned around, padding out of the nursery before Burntkit could say something.

Burntkit hesitated, but then sighed and got up, sneaking out of the nursery. He looked around the camp, surprised. It was completely empty, although he could hear movement from the warriors' and the apprentices' dens. *Pricklepaw and Stormpaw haven't even left with their mentors to train. It's too early for us to be awake!*

Snakekit looked around as well, clearly confused, but then padded toward the camp entrance, which was a little bit to the right of the warriors' den. "Come on!" She whispered, looking past her shoulder at Burntkit.

"Coming!" He whispered back and rushed after her. Burntkit still felt skeptical, but before he knew it, he was standing right in front of the thorn tunnel that led outside, a small path through the bramble walls that were protecting the camp. He could see the pine trees from beyond it, and he was sure he could see the sun rising slowly in the distance.

"And where do you two think you're going?"

Burntkit's fur bristled and he spun around. Sootblossom was looking at them from right outside the warriors' den.

"Oh! Well..." Snakekit started. "We wanted to-"

"Leave the camp?" Sootblossom guessed, but then sighed and sat down. "You know you can't."

"We know." Snakekit looked at her paws. "But it's so boring in the camp! We just wanted to explore the territory! Surely nothing bad would happen, right?"

"Actually, yes, something bad could happen." Sootblossom meowed. "The territory is very dangerous for tiny kits like you. You could come across badgers, foxes, dogs, twolegs, and maybe even cats from the other Clans."

"But aren't warriors and apprentices patrolling and defending the territory daily?" Burntkit tilted his head. "How can it be dangerous? Don't the others respect the border markings?"

"Some of the other cats do, but others might cross the borders for fun, or if they desperately need help from the other Clans. Or if they want to attack us." Sootblossom explained. "Meanwhile, badgers, foxes, dogs, and twolegs don't care about borders. They come and go wherever they want, and we can't really do anything to stop them. Many moons ago, when I was an apprentice, a lot of twolegs invaded our territory. I still have no idea why, because they didn't even come close to our camp. They just spent some days in our territory, and then left. No one knows what they did."

"Woah." Snakekit's pale amber eyes shone with surprise. "And what did you do to get rid of them?"

"Nothing. There was nothing we could have done, unfortunately." Sootblossom meowed. "They eventually left, but scared a lot of the prey away."

"Twolegs were mean." Burntkit whispered.

"They are! A lot of them are, actually." Sootblossom sighed. "Many cats die because of their stupid monsters, who carry twolegs in their

bellies. And some twolegs hate cats. They can throw rocks at them."

"What?" Snakekit exclaimed, wide-eyed. "Twolegs are so evil!"

"But don't kittypets live with them?" Burntkit asked, tilting his head. "They seem fine."

"Not all twolegs are bad, I guess." Sootblossom shrugged. "But I will never understand kittypets and why they want to live with twolegs. They only get to eat when their twoleg wants to. But anyway, let's stop talking about twolegs. Do you two want to hear a story?"

"Yes, please!" Snakekit meowed.

Burntkit nodded, excited.

"All right, well... how about I tell you about Scorpionkit?" Sootblossom asked.

"I've heard Ebonyheart talk about her sometimes." Burntkit murmured. "Isn't she Snakekit's sister?"

"She is." Sootblossom nodded. "She was a small ginger-brown she-kit with black splotches and a pure black tail, and-"

"Wait." Burntkit suddenly interrupted him. "Wasn't she considered weird, if her tail was a different color than her body? Because my tail is gray and I think some cats find it odd."

"Not really." Sootblossom meowed, surprised by the kit's question. "Scorpionkit also had black splotches on her, so her tail didn't seem out of place. However, you don't have gray fur anywhere else other than your tail. But it's not weird at all! It's interesting. Did you hear other cats say it's weird?"

"No, actually, I just sort of assumed that's what other cats think." Burntkit murmured.

"What? It's not weird!" Snakekit looked at him. "I think it's great!"

"Really? Well, thanks!" Burntkit purred, then looked back at Sootblossom. "You can continue with the story!"

"All right." Sootblossom meowed and took a moment to remember what he said last. "Right. So Scorpionkit, as I said, was a ginger-brown she-kit with black splotches and a black tail. Snakekit and her were born on a very cold leaf-bare night. Leaf-bares aren't usually too cold, but trust me when I say that I've never lived through a colder season! There was barely any prey in the forest, and there was so much snow... it was snowing a lot, and the wind was sharp cold!"

Burntkit started shivering just when he imagined it, then he looked around gratefully. "At least it's newleaf now." He whispered.

"True." Snakekit meowed. "I'm glad I don't remember how cold it was!"

"Anyway," Sootblossom continued. "The other cats tried their best to make the nursery as warm as possible, since Scorpionkit and you, Snakekit, were so tiny. But it just wasn't enough. One night, Ebonyheart woke up the entire camp saying that Scorpionkit... well, died. She said she woke up and Scorpionkit was freezing cold."

"Oh." Snakekit blinked. "Well..'" She paused.

Burntkit looked at her and saw that Snakekit was looking at her paws, unsure about what to say. "I wonder if Scorpionkit went to StarClan." He meowed.

"She surely did!" Sootblossom nodded. "Anyway, we found you in the forest the morning after Scorpionkit's death, Burntkit. And I'm glad we did, because otherwise you probably would have died from the cold out there!"

Burntkit tilted his head. "Wait, Ebonyheart said I was found on a moss nest, right?"

"Yes, that's right. Why?" Sootblossom asked.

"Well, it's... nevermind, actually." Burntkit meowed and looked around, deciding not to voice his thoughts.

"All right, then." Sootblossom meowed, then got up. "Anyway, I'll leave you two alone now. And don't try to leave the camp again

until you're apprentices! Understood?"

"Yes, Sootblossom." Snakekit sighed.

"All right." Burntkit meowed, watching Sootblossom walk toward the apprentices' den. The other cats have started waking up, and the camp was now pretty crowded. Burntkit looked back at Snakekit. "I'm sorry about your sister, by the way."

"Huh? Oh, it's fine." Snakekit meowed and looked around. "I didn't even get to meet her, anyway. I didn't even know what she looked like until today. Although I wish I got to meet her." She murmured sadly.

"Me too." Burntkit agreed, then looked at his paws as he began thinking of the day when he was found abandoned by a patrol.

But if I was found abandoned on a nest, then what happened to my mother? Who was she, and why did she leave me all alone and unprotected?

Chapter 3

Ebonyheart bent down and licked Burntkit's head while the dark ginger kit tried squirming away. "Be still, Burntkit!" The queen sighed.

"Leave me alone!" Burntkit complained, trying to get away from the queen's grasp.

Ebonyheart firmly put her paw in front of the kit. "No, you have to be clean."

"But I'm not even becoming an apprentice today!" Burntkit protested.

"I know, but you will tomorrow, and I want you to be as clean as possible." Ebonyheart purred, then raised her head. "Now, where's Snakekit?"

"I'm here!" Snakekit meowed from the corner of the nursery.

Burntkit raised his head and looked past Ebonyheart's pale gray paws. Snakekit was crouched over something. Burntkit squinted his eyes, trying to figure out what she found. *A beetle!*

Ebonyheart sighed. "Where did you even find that?"

Snakekit shrugged and looked back at the beetle. "I didn't find it, it found me! It just crawled in the nursery!"

Burntkit rolled his eyes, then looked back at Ebonyheart. "Can I go play with Snakekit now, please?"

"Not yet." Ebonyheart sighed and rasped her tongue over Burntkit's back. The kit let out a growl.

Snakekit giggled. "Your fur's glowing now! I guess we should start calling you Shiningkit."

"Hey!" Burntkit hissed. "Well, you-"

"Bumblestar!"

Burntkit froze as he heard someone call the ShadowClan leader. Snakekit looked away from the beetle instantly.

Ebonyheart's ears twitched. "That's Pigeonswoop. And it doesn't sound good." The queen got up and padded toward the den entrance, then sat down right outside so that Burntkit and Snakekit couldn't get out. Burntkit hissed quietly and padded over, trying to look past the queen. Snakekit followed him.

Burntkit saw Pigeonswoop run toward the leader's den, panting. The warrior looked beyond exhausted. *What happened to him?*

Bumblestar quickly padded out. "Pigeonswoop? What's wrong?"

"Foxes." Pigeonswoop managed to hiss. "A bunch of them. They attacked my patrol."

"Foxes?" Bumblestar's eyes widened and he looked around. "Smokedream?"

"Here!" Smokedream got up from where he was sitting and padded over to him. He looked at Pigeonswoop. "How many foxes are there?"

"At least three or four. And they're angry." Pigeonswoop whispered, trembling. "*Very* angry."

Bumblestar unsheathed his claws. He looked at Smokedream. "Gather some cats and go help the patrol. Pigeonswoop, you will lead the way." Then, the yellow leader turned toward the medicine cats' den. "Flintpaw!"

The young medicine cat apprentice padded out quickly. "Yes, Bumblestar?"

"Did Fawnwhisper come back from WindClan yet?" Bumblestar asked. Burntkit could tell by the leader's voice that he was extremely impatient.

"Not yet." Flintpaw responded, pawing the ground awkwardly. "She came in our territory yesterday while I was gathering herbs. She said WindClan is finally recovering from the greencough outbreak, but she won't be back for another day or two, because their medicine cat is still sick."

Bumblestar sighed, not looking happy with the answer. "All right. Prepare the herbs for when we come back." The leader turned around again. "Are we ready to go, Smokedream?"

"Ready." Smokedream nodded, but Burntkit couldn't see the deputy or the cats he chose. After a few heartbeats, he saw Bumblestar and a few other cats follow Pigeonswoop out of the camp.

"I want to go too!" Snakekit exclaimed, trying to crawl over Ebonyheart.

"Me too!" Burntkit agreed, about to follow her.

"No!" Ebonyheart spun around. "You two are too young to fight yet, and you don't even know any fighting moves!"

"But I do!" Snakekit protested. "I caught that beetle, so fighting foxes won't be a problem!" She turned around, but stopped in place when she saw that the beetle had disappeared "Wait, where did it go?"

"It doesn't matter, you two are staying here." Ebonyheart nudged the two kits toward their nest. "The others will take care of the foxes."

"It's not fair." Burntkit huffed. "Me and Snakekit would fight off the foxes by ourselves, if we could!"

"Yeah!" Snakekit flicked her tail. "Foxes can't be that dangerous!"

"Are you sure, little Snakekit?" Brokenflower suddenly limped in the nursery, looking at them.

Burntkit flinched when he noticed Brokenflower's missing leg. It was only a ginger-brown stub from what was supposed to be a leg.

"Oh, hi Brokenflower." Snakekit whispered, intimidated by the elder.

Brokenflower purred and limped forward. "Do you two know how I lost my leg?"

"No, actually." Burntkit looked up, trying to avoid looking at Brokenflower's leg. "What happened?"

"A fox happened." Brokenflower sighed and sat down slowly. "Many moons ago, back when I was still a young warrior, I was patrolling the territory like Pigeonswoop's patrol, and we suddenly got attacked by foxes. A lot of them, too! One of them bit off my leg during the battle. I barely had any time to react, too."

"That must have hurt." Snakekit flinched.

"It did, actually." Brokenflower nodded. "But it doesn't anymore."

"Is anyone going to lose a leg in this fight?" Burntkit suddenly asked, feeling anxious.

Brokenflower frowned. "I'm sure they won't. There are enough cats there to fend off the foxes rather quickly. ShadowClan had fewer cats back when I lost my leg."

Ebonyheart hesitated before speaking. "I hope you're right, but it doesn't really matter how many cats are there. You know how wild foxes are. And we don't know how many of them attacked the patrol."

"That's true. All we can do now is pray that they have everything under control." Brokenflower sighed, but then looked at Burntkit and Snakekit. "By the way, you two are becoming apprentices tomorrow, right?"

"Yes!" Burntkit stood tall, feeling proud. "I'm going to fool every cat that thinks that I can't use my tail!"

Snakekit frowned, twitching her tial tip. "I don't think I still want to be a warrior, actually."

"What? Why not?" Burntkit looked at her with surprise.

"Well, it doesn't seem fun to get attacked by a fox while patrolling." Snakekit looked at her paws. "I don't want to lose a leg. Or a Clanmate."

Brokenflower purred. "That's exactly why you're a true warrior, Snakekit! You care about yourself *and* others. But don't worry. You'll be able to defend yourself by the time you're old enough to go on patrols."

"But what about me?" Burntkit tilted his head. "Am I a real warrior?"

Burntflower nodded and looked warmly at the kit. "Of course you are, Burntkit. You both are. I'm sure you're both going to have each other's backs in the future. You will be amazing warriors, both of you."

Ebonyheart purred. "Thanks for coming, Brokenflower! The kits really needed a distraction like this."

"No problem." Brokenflower dipped her head, then looked at Burntkit and Snakekit. "If you two ever want to hear a story, you know exactly where to come! Lightskip might not be too happy, but he's just an old badger, don't listen to him. I'll happily tell you two stories whenever you want."

"Thanks, Brokenflower!" Burntkit purred.

"Yeah, thanks." Snakekit murmured.

Brokenflower dipped her head and limped outside. Burntkit then got up and peeked out of the nursery, surprised to see the camp almost deserted. "It's so weird seeing the camp like this." He whispered.

Snakekit padded next to him and looked around. "Oh, woah. It really is weird. Do you think the others will be all right?"

"Of course they will!" Ebonyheart meowed, although she sounded as if she was also trying to convince herself, not just the kits. "Now

come back here, both of you. Try to sleep. By the time you'll wake up, the others will hopefully be back in camp."

"All right, Ebonyheart." Burntkit meowed and padded toward his nest, lying down and closing his eyes. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the sounds from his Clanmates and the foxes fighting, but he knew that ShadowClan was winning. Burntkit soon fell asleep, relaxed. *I'm safe.*

Chapter 4

"Is he there yet?"

"Snakekit." Ebonyheart sighed, closing her eyes from annoyance.

"Come on, I want to leave camp already!" Snakekit paced back and forth near the den entrance.

"Snakekit!" Ebonyheart hissed, opening her eyes. "Bumblestar will call the Clan meeting when it's time."

"But we've been waiting since dawn, and the sun is almost at its highest spot!" Burntkit looked toward the camp entrance, excitement rushing through his fur. "I wonder who Bumblestar chose to be my mentor."

"What if Bumblestar himself will mentor one of us?" Snakekit asked, flicking her tail excitedly. "I can't wait!"

"That happens very rarely." Ebonyheart meowed.

Snakekit narrowed her eyes. "You know who our mentors will be, right?"

Ebonyheart nodded.

"Who are they?" Burntkit looked at her.

"You'll find out when Bumblestar calls the meeting." Ebonyheart flicked her tail.

"No fair!" Snakekit hissed.

Burntkit rolled his eyes and sat down at the entrance of the nursery, looking around. He didn't see Bumblestar anywhere. *Where is he?*

He suddenly picked up an odd scent. He got up and sniffed the air. "I smell something, and I don't think it's ShadowClan."

"What?" Snakekit got up and padded toward him, sniffing the air. She froze. "I smell it too!"

Ebonyheart raised her nose and sniffed the air. She then started hissing. "WindClan."

"It's not WindClan." Sootblossom purred, peeking inside the nursery. "It's Fawnwhisper. She's back!"

"She's back?" Burntkit tried looking past Sootblossom.

Sootblossom nodded and padded backwards, letting Burntkit leave the nursery. He rushed out and saw a spotted cream she-cat enter the camp and look around, flicking her short tail hesitantly.

"Fawnwhisper! It's good to see you again!" Bumblestar dipped his head and padded toward the medicine cat. "How's WindClan?"

"They're doing fine. Swangaze made a full recovery and told me I could come back home." Fawnwhisper reported. "Although Hareclaw was taken by the sickness."

Bumblestar looked surprised. "Hareclaw? I... well, may StarClan welcome him. You did everything you could."

"I know, but I should have saved him!" Fawnwhisper protested, looking at her black paws. "I'm a medicine cat, I'm meant to save cats! Why can't I do my job properly?"

"Fawnwhisper, you know that medicine cats can't save everyone." Bumblestar sighed. "WindClan would have probably lost even more cats if you didn't decide to help them. Now come on, Flintpaw might need your help."

"What? Why?" Fawnwhisper looked up and tilted her head. "Did something happen?"

"I'll let him explain." Bumblestar meowed.

Fawnwhisper opened her jaws to say something else, but then nodded and rushed toward the medicine cats' den.

Burntkit looked after her. "She looked exhausted."

"I bet she is." Ebonyheart meowed, lying down beside him. "I don't think greencough was easy on WindClan if they had to ask another Clan for help."

"But why did they need Fawnwhisper?" Snakekit looked at her mother. "Why couldn't they ask another medicine cat?"

"Because Fawnwhisper and Swangaze are close friends." Ebonyheart meowed, flicking her tail. "Waspspark is ThunderClan's only medicine cat, so he can't leave them alone. And Lilacheart and Briarpond from RiverClan are pretty... distant. I mean, they're friendly, but Swangaze didn't really form a friendship with them. That's what I've heard from Fawnwhisper, at least."

"Oh." Snakekit blinked. "Well-"

"Let all cats old enough to lurk in the shadows gather beneath the Shaderock for a Clan meeting!" Bumblestar suddenly yowled.

Burntkit looked at the leader, feeling excited. "It's time! It's time!"

Snakekit rushed outside, but Sootblossom quickly caught up to her and blocked her path. "Not so fast, Snakekit! You're becoming an apprentice. So act like one, all right?"

"Fine." Snakekit rolled her eyes.

Burntkit chuckled, then padded over to the meeting, trying to look as calm as possible. Snakekit followed him quickly, and Sootblossom and Ebonyheart were walking right behind them. Burntkit sat down and looked at Bumblestar.

When everyone gathered around, Bumblestar began speaking. "Today, two kits are ready to become apprentices. Snakekit and Burntkit, step forward."

Burntkit got up and stepped forward, excitement flooding him. He

felt like his heart was going to jump out of his chest. *I wonder who my mentor will be. Will I get a nice mentor? Are they going to like me?*

"Snakekit, you have reached your sixth moon, and you are ready to become an apprentice." Bumblestar looked at the tortoiseshell she-cat. "Until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Snakepaw. Frostedwillow will mentor you."

Burntkit turned his head to look at the white she-cat with blue-green eyes. She got up and padded forward, touching her nose with Snakepaw's.

"Burntkit." Bumblestar meowed. The tom flinched and turned his head to look at the leader again. "Until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Burntpaw. Needlerose will mentor you."

Burntpaw instantly got up and turned, looking around. The silver she-cat with gray stripes purred and padded toward him, touching her nose with his. "I'll be a great mentor, I promise. And if you'll work hard, you'll become a warrior in no time."

"Snakepaw! Burntpaw!" The Clan chanted.

"Meeting dismissed." Bumblestar meowed and jumped down from the Shaderock.

"Come talk with me when you're ready to begin training." Needlerose told him, then turned around and padded away.

Sootblossom and Ebonyheart rushed toward him, looking proud. "Congratulations, both of you!"

"Thank you!" Snakepaw purred, flicking her tail happily. "I can't believe I'm an apprentice now!"

"Me neither!" Burntpaw flicked his gray tail, looking after Needlerose. "I better go talk with my mentor now. See you all later!" He said, then rushed toward the silver she-cat, who was looking at the thorn tunnel. "Needlerose! What will we do now?"

The she-cat turned her head to look at him. "Well, first, I'll give you a tour of the territory. Come on, follow me!"

"All right!" Burntpaw followed Needlerose out of camp through the thorn tunnel. He then stopped, remembering when he got caught trying to leave the camp with Snakepaw. He then shook his head and padded outside. *I'm not a kit anymore. I'm an apprentice now, and I can leave the camp without a problem.*

Burntpaw looked around, surprised. Pine trees stood tall all around him, their branches stretching high toward the sky, blocking it from view. The leaves crunched underneath his paws while the wind whistled through the trees. He heard birds chirping happily from the trees, and he could scent a few frogs not far from them. He twitched his ears, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sight. *And yet I don't want to leave. The forest is so pretty!*

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Needlerose purred. "We might not have the best territory, but it's still ours, and we must protect it with our lives. Come on now, let's head over to the ThunderClan border and start the tour from there."

Burntpaw followed Needlerose back to camp, holding moss in his jaws. He looked at her after they left the thorn tunnel behind and entered the camp.

"And this is it for today. Meet me out of camp tomorrow, at dawn. That's when training begins. I'll teach you to hunt, all right?" Needlerose looked at him.

Burntpaw nodded, then padded toward the apprentices' den. He looked around and dropped his nest in an empty spot. He then padded outside, where Snakepaw was waiting for him.

"Isn't it beautiful outside?" Snakepaw asked, looking toward the thorn tunnel "I can't wait for tomorrow! Frostedwillow told me that she's going to teach me to hunt!"

"Needlerose told me the same thing!" Burntpaw purred excitedly. "Maybe we can train together?"

"All right, sure, I'll come watch you fail to catch a mouse." Snakepaw sneered.

"Hey!" Burntpaw hissed. "You'll be the one failing, not me!"

"We'll see about that." Snakepaw purred. "Anyway, did you hear that Ebonyheart wants to stay in the nursery and help future queens with their kits?"

Burntpaw blinked, surprised. "What? Really? I honestly didn't expect that. So she wants to be a permanent queen?"

"She does, yes." Snakepaw looked toward the nursery, then back at Burntpaw. "Isn't that weird? I mean, all right, it's not weird, but *I* wouldn't want to be a queen and be stuck in the nursery all day. I want to be a warrior! I want to fight and hunt!"

Burntpaw tilted his head amusedly. "Didn't you say yesterday that you don't want to be a warrior anymore?"

"Yeah, well, I changed my mind." Snakepaw gave her chest an embarrassed lick.

"Well, we're indeed denmates now. Congratulations!" Stormpaw meowed, padding toward them. Burntpaw turned his head to look at him.

"Congratulations. Yay. More cats in the den, less time for myself." Pricklepaw rolled his eyes.

"Pricklepaw! Be nice!" Stormpaw hissed, then looked at the new apprentices. "Don't mind him. You'll soon get used to him. He always complains about everything. He acts like an elder."

"That's not true!" Pricklepaw's fur bristled.

Snakepaw rolled her eyes. "I'll try my best not to claw him, I guess."

"Hey!" Pricklepaw hissed.

"Anyway, wasn't Sootblossom searching for you?" Stormpaw asked Pricklepaw. "He said you overslept today!"

"What?" Pricklepaw blinked, then turned his head to look at

Sootblossom. "Oh, just great. Well, see you later, I guess."

Burntpaw looked after Pricklepaw, who rushed toward his mentor. He then turned his head. "I'm so excited to start training tomorrow! I wonder what my first catch will be."

"It's going to be a mouse for sure." Snakepaw purred.

"No, you're wrong!" Burntpaw meowed. "I'll surely catch something bigger, like a bird!"

"It doesn't matter what you catch first." Ebonyheart meowed, stepping toward them and sitting down. "What matters is bringing fresh-kill back to the Clan. Even if it's a mouse." She glared at Snakepaw.

Snakepaw rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything.

Burntpaw looked at her and purred. *Well, I'll catch more prey than Snakepaw will! I'll show her. I can't wait for training to begin!*

Allegiance Update: 1

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Smokedream** - Dark gray tom with pale blue eyes

Medicine cat: **Fawnwhisper** - Cream she-cat with white spots and black paws

Apprentice, Flintpaw - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Oakgaze** - Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Needlerose - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Apprentice, Burntpaw - Dark ginger tom with lighter paws, a brown belly and a gray tail with amber eyes

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings

Apprentice, Stormpaw - Blue-gray tabby tom

Frostedwillow - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Apprentice, Snakepaw - Tortoiseshell she-cat with pale amber eyes

Sootblossom - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Pricklepaw - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle and black ears

Elders: **Brokenflower** - Ginger-brown she-cat with white paws and a missing leg

Lightskip - Cream-and-white she-cat

ThunderClan

Leader: **Snailstar** - Black-and-brown tom

Deputy: **Cloverwhisper** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Medicine cat: **Waspspark** - Tall gray tom with ginger spots

Warriors: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

Blazesong - Ginger she-cat with gray stripes and a white belly with green eyes

Apprentice, Kestrelpaw - Mottled cream tom

Petalmist - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

Addersnarl - Very dark ginger tom with a black stripe running down his spine

Hazelfoot - Brown tom with a white leg

Apprentice, Weaselpaw - Ginger-and-white tom

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Queens: **Silentpetal** - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail. Mother to Addersnarl's kits: Emberkit, a ginger tom with a white belly and dark amber eyes, and Toadkit, a black tom with silver patches

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes. Mother to

Hazelfoot's kit: Eaglekit, a brown tabby tom with white legs and a golden muzzle

WindClan

Leader: **Fernstar** - Gray tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: **Bearback** - Brown tom with black stripes

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Flowerwing** - Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Falconpaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Violetroar - Purplish-brown she-cat

Apprentice, Dawnpaw - Ginger she-cat with white spots

Plumbreeze - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Birchwhistle - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Queens: **Mossripple** - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples. Expecting Birchwhistle's kits

Elders: **Bramblefrost** - Pale brown tabby tom with icy-blue eyes

RiverClan

Leader: **Frecklestar** - Brown-and-cream she-cat with black spots on her face

Deputy: **Troutpatch** - Gray tom with black dapples and green eyes

Medicine cat: **Lilacheart** - Black-and-silver tabby she-cat

Apprentice, Briarpond - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Tornfeather** - Black tom with a short tail

Swiftbrook - Gray she-cat with long legs

Apprentice, Dogpaw - Pale brown she-cat with black spots and white paws

Berryfeather - Pale ginger she-cat

Bouldershade - Black tom

Apprentice, Spottedpaw - Black she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Nettlebrook - Cream-and-white she-cat

Apprentice, Spiderpaw - Black-and-white tom with a reddish belly

Whitealder - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Elders: **Goosepath** - Gray-and-white speckled tom

Aspenfeather - Brown tom with dark ginger markings

Whitewhisker - Pale gray-and-white tom with long whiskers

Chapter 5

A few moons had passed since Burntpaw and Snakepaw became apprentices, and they already knew how to hunt and fight pretty well. Ebonyheart was, again, expecting Sootblossom's kits, and Burntpaw noticed that Snakepaw was very excited to meet her new siblings.

Burntpaw followed Needlerose outside of camp, flicking his gray tail with excitement. "What are we going to do today?" The tom asked.

Needlerose didn't respond. Instead, she turned to the right once she left the camp and padded that way. Burntpaw tilted his head and followed her. *Why is she leading me to the Carrionplace?*

Burntpaw looked past Needlerose and he could see the tall pale yellow and disgusting Twoleg den, surrounded by a very tall silver mesh. He could already hear the rats squeaking from around it. But before they could reach it, Needlerose turned around and sat down, looking at the apprentice with a serious expression.

"All right. Today, I want you to hunt alone and catch as much prey as you can, and I'll be observing you from a distance." Needlerose meowed. "I want to test your hunting skills."

Burntpaw blinked in surprise, but nodded. "All right, Needlerose. How much prey do I have to catch?"

"I'll tell you when to stop." Needlerose flicked her tail. "Now go!"

Burntpaw nodded and turned around, padding away and sniffing the air. He looked around the pine forest, perking his ears and trying to catch the sound of prey. Suddenly, he froze as he saw something brown on the ground near a pine tree. He squinted his eyes, but then he looked away, annoyed. *It's just a pinecone.*

Burntpaw's ears twitched as he heard something. He turned around

and followed the sound, then he stopped. There was a puddle of water ahead of him, and a frog sat next to it. Burntpaw instantly dropped into a crouch and unsheathed his claws. He then quickly let out a hiss and lunged forward, swiping at the frog. It fell backwards from the blow, landing in the water, and Burntpaw jumped after it and grabbed it, raising his head. He got out of the puddle and shook his fur, shivering slightly from the cold.

After burying it, he suddenly felt like he was being watched, but he brushed it off. *It's just Needlerose, it's fine.*

Burntpaw's ears twitched and he looked at a bush. *Squirrel!* He dropped into a crouch and creeped toward it. He could see the squirrel's tail poking out of the bush. He bared his teeth, but before he could jump, he accidentally stepped on a twig, cracking it. The sound made the squirrel instantly turn around. Burntpaw growled in annoyance and pounced in the bush, clawing the ground and trying to catch the squirrel, but then he saw it run out of the bush, desperate to get away from him. Burntpaw quickly ran after it.

"Burntpaw!" Needlerose called from somewhere behind him, but he ignored her. He was focused on the squirrel and kept on chasing it. Suddenly, he realized that his paws weren't touching the grass anymore. He was running on a very hard stone. *The Thunderpath!* But he didn't stop running. He didn't hear any noise to indicate any incoming monsters, and the Thunderpath wasn't vibrating, either. *I've got you now!*

Burntpaw jumped on the squirrel, catching it under his paw. He quickly delivered the final blow to the squirrel's neck, then he raised his head, panting, just to realize that he had no idea where he was. *Where in StarClan's name am I?*

He then saw Needlerose on the other side of the Thunderpath, glaring at him. She did not look happy at all. Burntpaw looked around, realizing that he wasn't in his territory anymore. He was surrounded by oak trees now, not by the pine trees he was familiar with. *I'm in ThunderClan's territory! I better get back, and fast.*

"ShadowClan cat!"

Burntpaw spun around and saw a gray tabby tom with a black muzzle run toward him, snarling. The tom backed off, trembling. *Uh-oh.*

"What are you doing in our territory? Are you spying on us?" The ThunderClan warrior hissed, his claws unsheathed. His eyes were glowing with menace.

"N-No!" Burntpaw stammered, feeling ashamed for trespassing. "I-I was just..."

The tom growled and raised an unsheathed paw. Burntpaw instinctively closed his eyes, and before he could back down he felt a piercing pain in his left eye. He let out a pained hiss and backed off, shaking his head. It felt as if thousands of small thorns were stuck directly in his eye. *Sweet StarClan, this hurts!*

"This will teach you to not trespass again." The ThunderClan warrior growled.

"Burntpaw!" Needlerose's agitated voice came from next to him. "What have you done? He's just an apprentice! He didn't mean to trespass, it was an accident you frog-brain!"

Burntpaw tried opening his eyes, but he realized that he couldn't open his left eye. He tried to, but it just wouldn't open. He looked down and saw that blood was dripping from his face. He let out a scared hiss, the pain starting to make him feel dizzy.

"Don't worry, we're going to get you to the medicine cat," Needlerose reassured him, then she glared at the ThunderClan warrior. "I hope you're happy with yourself, Jaggedriver! And keep that stupid squirrel, but Bumblestar will know about this." She growled, then she rested her tail on Burntpaw's back in a comforting manner. "Come on."

Burntpaw heard Jaggedriver throw an insult at them with a sneer, but he ignored him. He followed Needlerose, letting her tail rest on his back. He tried opening his left eye again, but he just couldn't. "Needlerose, do... do you think he blinded me?"

"What? No!" Needlerose stopped, looking at him with horror. "You closed your eyes at the right time, although that does look like a deep wound. Fawnwhisper and Flintpaw will help you, don't worry."

"And my training?" Burntpaw asked as he crossed the Thunderpath with his mentor, shivering.

"Forget about the training!" Needlerose spat. "You're hurt. You don't think I'd make you train while you're like this, right?"

"I suppose not." Burntpaw whispered, and then he fell silent. The dizziness continued as his vision started to blur slightly. He staggered a bit, leaning gratefully on Needlerose's shoulder. He said nothing as his mentor led him through the thorn tunnel back in the safety of the camp, looking down and trying not to move his head too much.

"Burntpaw!" Snakepaw's yowl made Burntpaw look up again. She quickly ran over to him. "What happened? You're hurt! Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine." Burntpaw murmured, although he knew that was a lie. Sootblossom and Ebonyheart rushed toward him, looking confused and worried.

"What-" Ebonyheart tried speaking.

"Fawnwhisper! Flintpaw!" Needlerose's voice interrupted the queen.

The two medicine cats padded out of their den in a hurry, looking at them. "What in StarClan's name happened to Burntpaw?" Fawnwhisper ran toward them, looking confused. "You didn't stumble across a rogue in our territory, did you? Or a fox, or..."

"No, it was ThunderClan." Needlerose explained.

"What?" Fawnwhisper blinked, her eyes widening with surprise.

"I'll explain later, but now I have to talk to Bumblestar." Needlerose meowed, moving away from Burntpaw slightly. She then looked

back at her apprentice worriedly. "Will you be all right?"

The apprentice nodded slowly, wishing the pain would go away.

"Follow me." Fawnwhisper told Burntpaw, then she turned and padded in her den. The apprentice followed the medicine cat slowly as Flintpaw matched his pace and walked alongside him. Burntpaw gratefully leaned on him.

The tom looked up at the rock that was propped up next to the Shaderock and padded in the cave that was sheltered underneath. It was a bit chillier inside and he flinched from the sudden change of air. The cave was a tiny clearing edged with thick ferns. The herbs were stored along one side of the clearing in tiny holes covered with ferns. He looked around and saw a couple of nests lined up at the left of the den.

"Lay down there." Fawnwhisper pointed with her muzzle to the nearest nest. "Can you tell me what exactly happened?"

"Well..." Burntpaw murmured, lying down slowly in the nest. "Needlerose told me to catch some prey on my own because she wanted to see how I would do, and at some point I was chasing a squirrel, and without realizing I chased it all the way to ThunderClan territory. I only realized where I was when I killed it, and I wanted to head back, but then a ThunderClan cat - I think his name was Jaggedriver - confronted me and he-"

"Clawed your face?" Flintpaw finished for him.

"Yes! Exactly." Burntpaw nodded. "And now I can't open my eye... can I still see with it?"

"I'm not sure." Fawnwhisper approached him and inspected the wound. "Flintpaw, get some marigold. You know what to mix in order to get the right poultice."

Flintpaw nodded and padded toward the herbs. Burntpaw looked after him, then he heard Fawnwhisper hiss. He felt disheartened.

"That fox-heart... he had no right to attack you. You didn't cross the border on purpose. It was an accident." Fawnwhisper growled, then

looked at Burntpaw. "Now, this might hurt a little bit, but your eye is fine. You can still see with it, but..."

"But?" Burntpaw pressed. He was scared of what the she-cat might say next.

"The wound looks pretty badly. I think you will be left with a scar." Fawnwhisper murmured.

"A scar?" Burntpaw gaped, feeling shocked. "But I don't want that ThunderClan warrior to make fun of me every time he see me!"

"He better not." Fawnwhisper hissed. "I'm sure Bumblestar will mention this at tonight's Gathering. But I don't think the ThunderClan cat will say anything to you, don't worry."

"Can I come in?" Snakepaw's voice was heard from the den entrance. Burntpaw turned his head to look her.

"Sure." Fawnwhisper meowed as Snakepaw padded in and sat down. "Burntpaw is fine, but he will be left with a scar."

Snakepaw looked at him and grimaced. "That's a pretty nasty wound."

Burntpaw let out a warning growl, then Flintpaw approached him. Burntpaw closed his right eye shut, and after a few heartbeats his wound started to sting as if he was being attacked by a bee. He bared his teeth and tried to move away.

"Don't move!" Flintpaw hissed. "It's almost done. You will feel better afterwards."

"Be careful, Flintpaw!" Fawnwhisper murmured from somewhere close to the apprentices.

Burntpaw unsheathed his claws and dug them in his nest, trying to keep from moving away from Flintpaw. He then heard paw steps and realized that Snakepaw was sitting next to him now. "Don't worry, you will have a battle scar after this! You're going to look more fierce than ever!"

"You think so?" Burntpaw hissed, and then he realized that the stinging sensation stopped. The pain started gradually dying down and he relaxed, feeling better already. There was a weird cold sensation near his wound, but he didn't mind it. As Flintpaw backed down, Burntpaw tried to open his eyes. But he still couldn't open his wounded eye.

"Can I... look at my face?" Burntpaw asked, looking at Fawnwhisper. "I want to see how bad the wound is."

Fawnwhisper blinked, surprised, but nodded and pointed with her tail toward a pool of water situated on the far side of the den. "Sure."

Burntpaw got up, still feeling a bit dizzy, and padded toward the pool of water. He looked down and let out a surprised shriek. He had three claw marks over his left eye, although he couldn't see them properly due to the poultice that Flintpaw put on them. The poultice was pretty much holding his eye shut, and he could see that the wound was still bright red.

Snakepaw approached him, flattening her ears and looking at him sadly. "I hope Jaggedriver gets punished. Needlerose told me what happened. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It's just a minor scar, I guess." Burntpaw shrugged, staring at his reflection from the puddle. He couldn't look away from his wound.

"Go rest now." Fawnwhisper meowed gently. "But when you wake up, come straight to me so I can check on your wound. You'll be excused from your training for a while, but I think you can still go to the Gathering tonight. I'm pretty sure Bumblestar wants you to be there, after what happened with Jaggedriver."

"All right, thanks." Burntpaw mumbled and turned around, padding out of the medicine cats' den and heading toward the apprentices' den, followed closely by Snakepaw. *That stupid Jaggedriver and his Clan... he'll pay, I'll make sure of it.*

Chapter 6

Burntpaw padded after his Clanmates, the full moon floating above them on the night sky. Burntpaw was feeling a little better, and he could open his left eye now, but the wound still hurt and he could feel it even when he was just resting. He let out a growl. *Snakepaw said the scar would make me look fierce, but I think she was just saying that to make me feel better. She doesn't know how I feel! I didn't even do anything wrong, I was just trying to catch a stupid squirrel! Jaggedriver didn't have to attack me, he could have just sent me off with a warning!*

Burntpaw's ears twitched as he followed his Clanmates through the tunnel that led under the Thunderpath. He hated walking there, but it was way safer than travelling on the Thunderpath, and it got them to the other side safely. Bumblestar flicked his tail and padded out of the tunnel, then he turned right and led them toward the Fourtrees.

Burntpaw blinked as his Clanmates stopped. He pushed forward and looked down, excitement flooding through him. He loved Gatherings, and enjoyed talking with cats from the other Clans. The cats stopped at the top of the large, circular hollow. The four trees were positioned in a circular manner, with one tree in each corner of the hollow. Two cats were sitting on the Great Rock situated near the center, although Burntpaw couldn't recognize them due to being too far away.

Bumblestar raised his tail after a few heartbeats, allowing his cats to scatter around. Burntpaw rushed toward the gathered cats, flicking his tail. This was only his second Gathering, and although he still felt weird being surrounded by cats from all the other Clans, he enjoyed talking with them.

Burntpaw looked around and hissed when he saw Jaggedriver talking with another cat. Snakepaw approached him and followed his gaze. "Is that him? Jaggedriver?"

"Yes." Burntpaw growled, lashing his tail and taking a step toward

him.

Before he could reach him, however, Needlerose ran toward him and stepped in front of him, blocking his path. "Stop! This is a Gathering, not a fight! There's a truce tonight, remember?"

Burntpaw rolled his eyes. "I know, but I don't think he deserves to be here."

"ThunderClan doesn't know what he did yet," Needlerose explained with a sigh. "But they will find out soon and hopefully scold him. You can head off now, but try to stay away from Jaggedriver. I don't think it would be good if he spotted you."

Burntpaw nodded and turned around, padding back to Snakepaw. His friend looked surprised. "Woah, he really upset you."

"You think?" Burntpaw snapped and sat down, resting his gray tail over his light ginger paws and looked at the leaders. Bumblestar dipped his head to Frecklestar, RiverClan's leader, although he was avoiding Snailstar's gaze. The ThunderClan leader tilted his head, confused.

Soon, Burntpaw heard more paw steps from behind him. He turned his head and saw Fernstar leading his Clan toward them from the direction of the moor. Burntpaw looked at the scrawny cats before they scattered around the clearing. Fernstar jumped on the Great Rock and dipped his head. "Greetings."

"Greetings to you too, Fernstar." Frecklestar meowed, then looked at the sky. "Perfect, there are no clouds tonight. And it's rather warm. I think we should wait a bit before starting the Gathering."

"I agree." Snailstar meowed and rested his black-and-brown tail over his brown paws, looking at the gathered cats.

Burntpaw looked at Snakepaw and lowered his voice. "What do you think Snailstar will say when he finds out what one of his warriors did?"

"No idea, but I hope he doesn't take it as a threat." Snakepaw whispered. "Hopefully Jaggedriver will be punished."

"Who will be punished and why?"

Burntpaw turned his head and saw Falconpaw and Dawnpaw, WindClan's two apprentices, step toward them. "Oh, hello!" Burntpaw meowed.

"Hello- what in StarClan's name happened to your eye?" Falconpaw shrieked when he saw Burntpaw's wound. The ShadowClan tom growled, his fur spiking.

Snakepaw looked at him, then at the WindClan apprentice. "It's a long story."

"Well, we have time!" Dawnpaw flicked her tail. "Tell us!"

"I'd rather not." Burntpaw hissed. "You'll find out what happened soon enough."

"All right, then. No need to get all ruffled up." Falconpaw looked surprised, but he didn't say anything else.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Bumblestar's voice echoed around the clearing. Burntpaw turned his head to look at the leaders.

"I'll share first." Frecklestar meowed and got up, flicking her tail. "Prey has been running well in RiverClan, and the river is full of fish. However, a patrol noticed a badger near the border with WindClan, but they decided to stay away from it." She turned her head to look at the WindClan leader. "I hope everything's fine in WindClan."

"Thank you for the warning, Frecklestar." Fernstar dipped his head. "We haven't seen any badgers on our territory, but Bearback will double the patrols and we will be ready if we spot the badger. Since I started speaking, I'll share next. Are you done, Frecklestar?"

The RiverClan leader nodded and sat back down. Fernstar got up, looking around. "Prey has been running well in WindClan as well. And we also have a new litter of kits. Mossripple gave birth to three healthy kits called Lightkit, Maplekit, and Robinkit. That is all."

Fernstar sat down, and before anyone could say something,

Bumblestar got up quickly and sneaked a glance at Snailstar.

"Prey has also been running well in ShadowClan, and we have thankfully not spotted any Twolegs in our territory yet." Bumblestar meowed, then turned his head to look at the ThunderClan leader. "Now. Snailstar, I want to let you know that one of your warriors attacked one of my cats."

Burntpaw's ears twitched with surprise and broke into a purr. *He didn't forget!*

Snailstar looked at the ShadowClan leader with suspicion. "When did this happen? And what cat was it?"

"One of my apprentices accidentally crossed the border while chasing a squirrel." Bumblestar explained, sneaking a glance at Burntpaw, then he looked back at Snailstar. "He was about to leave, when one of your cats confronted him. What he did was wrong, yes, and it was a normal reaction, but your warrior clawed my apprentice's face and left him with a nasty wound that could potentially turn into a scar."

Snailstar's ears twitched with surprise, then he lashed his tail. "And what warrior, to be exact?"

"Jaggedriver." Bumblestar hissed.

Burntpaw turned his head to look at the ThunderClan warrior. The gray tabby tom stared at the leaders with a shocked expression, his fur bristling.

Snailstar looked at his warrior, irritated. "Thank you. I'll be sure to have a talk with him when we get back to camp."

"What?" Jaggedriver got up, lashing his tail. "I was just defending our territory from that little ShadowClan flea-pelt!"

"Hey!" Sootblossom got up, growling, and he unsheathed his claws. "You could have been more peaceful and just sent him off with a warning! You didn't have to attack him!"

More cats got up, hissing and snarling, some siding with

Sootblossom, some with Jaggedriver. Burntpaw looked around, surprised, and lowered his head, feeling guilty and scared. *Wait, I didn't mean for this to happen! Please don't attack each other!*

"That's enough!" Snailstar hissed, looking around with an annoyed expression. "I'll handle this when we get back to camp. Although I'm very disappointed in you, Jaggedriver. I expected better from you."

Jaggedriver growled, but he sat back down and looked at his paws. Burntpaw raised his head triumphantly and looked back at the leaders.

Bumblestar sat back down, satisfied, so Snailstar looked at the gathered cats. "I'll continue speaking, then. ThunderClan's prey has been running well, however some Twolegs came in our territory and scared some of the prey away, but thankfully they haven't approached the camp." He meowed, flicking his ears. "And we have two new warriors. Kestrelpaw and Weaselpaw are now Kestrelstrike and Weaselfall."

Snailstar sat back down, nodding to the other leaders. "The Gathering is now over!" Frecklestar meowed and jumped down from the Great Rock. "RiverClan, let's go back to camp!"

Bumblestar jumped down as well, followed quickly by the other leaders. "ShadowClan! To me!"

Burntpaw got up and dipped his head toward Falconpaw and Dawnpaw as a goodbye, then rushed toward Bumblestar, followed by Snakepaw. When all the ShadowClan cats were gathered around, the leader nodded and started leading them back to their camp.

"Snailstar looked pretty upset." Snakepaw whispered toward Burntpaw. "I'm sure Jaggedriver will get the scolding of his life. And he's a warrior. Funny."

"Good." Burntpaw hissed.

Snakepaw tilted her head worriedly. "Are you all right? You've been acting kind of strange since your encounter with Jaggedriver."

"I'm fine, but I'm still a little upset from that." Burntpaw hissed. "I

still don't understand why Jaggedriver clawed me. I didn't even trespass on purprose!"

"I know, but I guess Jaggedriver is just a crazy toad-brain who will get punished for what he did, which he definitely deserves." Snakepaw shrugged, then nudged Burntpaw. "Come on, you'll feel better tomorrow! And your scar doesn't even look bad. I think it looks great!"

Burntpaw purred. "I guess you're right."

The apprentices followed their Clanmates out of the Thunderpath tunnel and through the territory toward ShadowClan's camp. He looked at the Carrionplace when they passed by it and shivered when he saw all the crowfood that the Twolegs were throwing there. He kept on following his Clanmates, disgusted at the thought that rats were hiding in that disgusting place. *I can't believe that we sometimes hunt the rats when there's not enough prey. They're so disgusting! Hopefully I won't ever get to experience that. It doesn't happen too often anyway, from what I've heard.*

Burntpaw pushed his way through the thorn tunnel and padded over to the apprentices' den, yawning. He lay down in his nest and closed his eyes. He rolled around in his nest for a while before he finally managed to fall asleep.

Chapter 7

Burntpaw sat by the Thunderpath and stared into ThunderClan's territory, the wind ruffling his fur. It was the next day after the Gathering and he recently woke up. He was excused from training for a few days, so he went out for a walk and now he wanted to do one more thing before going back to camp. *Snailstar said he would talk with Jaggedriver when they got back to camp, but I'm sure he didn't. Why would he scold one of his warriors, anyway? I want take matters into my own paws.*

Burntpaw got up and wanted to cross the Thunderpath, but then hesitated and looked behind him in the direction of the camp. *Am I sure I want to do this? It's against the warrior code, I think. And it's not right.*

But then Burntpaw shook his head and looked toward the enemy Clan's territory, stepping on the Thunderpath determinedly. *No. It wasn't right for Jaggedriver to attack me for no reason, and yet he still did it anyway. If he didn't care, why should I?*

Burntpaw lashed his gray tail as he walked confidently on the Thunderpath, but it soon started vibrating. He spun around and saw a monster rush toward him, screeching and wailing. Burntpaw's eyes widened with shock and he turned around, making a run for ThunderClan's territory. He pounced on the grass and rolled on his back as the monster ran past him. He raised his head and looked after it, panting. *That was way too close.*

Burntpaw got up and shook his fur, looking around ThunderClan's territory. He was now surrounded by large oak trees and thick bushes. The grass under his paws felt soft, even softer than it was on ShadowClan's territory. Burntpaw turned his head to look at a squirrel that was climbing a tree slowly. He rolled his eyes.

Suddenly, a crow landed on a rock in front of him, standing with its back at him as it preened its wings. Burntpaw dropped into a crouch and creeped toward it, unsheathing his claws. He pounced

on the crow and swiftly killed it, then he picked it up and walked around with it for a bit before burying it by a tree. *I wonder when a ThunderClan patrol will find me. Does this stupid Clan even patrol their borders?*

"ShadowClan cat!"

I spoke too soon. Burntpaw growled and turned around to face the ThunderClan patrol that was approaching him. He bared his teeth with hate when he saw that Jaggedriver among them. The gray tabby tom looked shocked to see him, but he ran ahead of the others and stopped right in front of him.

"What are you doing here now? You didn't cross the border accidentally, so you have no excuse this time." Jaggedriver sneered and raised an unsheathed paw.

Burntpaw's fur bristled as he unsheathed his paws and was ready to strike back, but before any of them were able to do anything, a ginger she-cat with gray stripes ran between them and pushed her Clanmate away. "Jaggedriver, stop it!"

"Why?" Jaggedriver looked at the she-cat, his blue eyes blazing with hate. "Snailstar already gave me apprentice duties for a moon just because I attacked this stupid apprentice, and now he dares to come back. What does he want?"

"That's an interesting question." A tan-and-silver she-cat murmured, padding toward him. "What do you want?"

"I say we take him back to our camp, Cloverwhisper!" Jaggedriver suggested. "I'm sure-"

"Quiet, Jaggedriver! I didn't ask for your opinion." Cloverwhisper growled, then looked back at Burntpaw. "So, what do you want?"

Burntpaw felt his fur hot with embarrassment under the questioning gazes of the ThunderClan cats, but he stood tall. "I'm just passing through."

"Passing through our territory *and* hunting?" The ginger she-cat with gray stripes tilted her head, pointing her tail toward the place

where Burntpaw buried the crow.

"Blazesong is right." Cloverwhisper narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You should leave, before things get worse for you than they already are."

Burntpaw stared at them defensively. "I'm not doing anything wrong, I was just passing through and decided to hunt a little bit before I-"

"And where exactly are you going? Are you running off to become a kittypet?" Jaggedriver taunted him, lashing his tail.

Burntpaw bared his teeth at him. "I think you've confused me. I'm not a ThunderClan cat. ShadowClan cats never run away to become kittypets, unlike you."

"How *dare* you?" Jaggedriver hissed and raised an unsheathed paw again, and Burntpaw arched his back, preparing to pounce on him, but Cloverwhisper flicked her tail for Jaggedriver to stop.

She looked at the ShadowClan apprentice. "Answer Jaggedriver's question. Where were you going?"

"Well..." Burntpaw blinked, trying to come up with an answer quickly. "To RiverClan's territory. It's ShadowClan's business only."

Cloverwhisper rolled her eyes. "Well, go ahead, then."

Burntpaw froze. "Oh. Well-"

"You said you're going to RiverClan's territory. Go already, before I shred your pelt." Jaggedriver growled, baring his teeth menacingly.

That's it! Burntpaw hissed and pounced on Jaggedriver, pinning the tom down. Jaggedriver stared at him, shocked, and Burntpaw took advantage of his confusion and slashed his claws across the gray tabby's belly. He suddenly felt something slam into him and he let out a surprised shriek as he fell off the warrior. Blazesong was staring at him, her green eyes flickering with irritation.

Jaggedriver got up and growled, raking his claws across Burntpaw's

back. The apprentice yowled, but before he had time to react, Cloverwhisper stepped forward and nudged Jaggedriver away. "Enough, I think this apprentice has learned his lesson. You, get back to your camp, before I go and get Snailstar."

Burntpaw got up shakily and panted, looking at the ThunderClan warriors with hate. He then blinked, the realization of what he had done crashing into him. Shame surged through him as he stepped backward and bared his teeth, but he spun around and ran back to ShadowClan's territory, his paws barely touching the Thunderpath at how fast he was running. He could hear Jaggedriver insulting him from the other side of the Thunderpath, but he ignored him. He hid behind a rock and sat down, staring at his paws in shame. *What have I done?*

Burntpaw looked around in disbelief. *Why did I attack Jaggedriver? He did claw me yesterday, but... it's not an excuse. Or is it?*

Then, Burntpaw rolled his eyes and got up, padding toward camp. *Jaggedriver is such a pain in the tail! I just had to make him feel what I felt. I didn't even claw him hard enough to give him a scar, like he did to me. And if he's out patrolling, then that means that ThunderClan didn't really care about what he did. Well, I'll* make *them care.*

Burntpaw pushed his way through the thorn tunnel and padded back in camp. He blinked, surprised at how quiet the camp was. Cats were sitting together in small groups and whispering to each other, and Smokedream wasn't organizing any patrols.

"Where have you been?" Snakepaw rushed toward. Burntpaw, looking relieved to see him. "When I came back from training and didn't see you anywhere, I was getting worried, and-" She suddenly stopped and sniffed the air, blinking. "Wait, did you encounter a ThunderClan patrol?"

"What?" Burntpaw blinked, then he realized that he had ThunderClan scent on him. *Oh, isn't that great?* He thought irritably.

"Wait." Snakepaw stared at him with shock. "You didn't... go in ThunderClan's territory, did you? Oh sweet StarClan, you're bleeding!"

"That's exactly what I did. And?" Burntpaw shrugged as Snakepaw inspected his wound from his back. "Jaggedriver was out patrolling, so that means Snailstar didn't really care that he clawed me for no reason. I just-"

"You're such a toad-brain." Snakepaw sighed with exasperation. "They probably did care and punished him, but didn't stop him from going on patrols. You can't know that."

"I guess. But I still wanted to mess with ThunderClan for a little. But I won't go there again, I promise." Burntpaw said, but he knew he was lying. *They obviously didn't care, and I don't want to stop messing with them yet. I won't do anything too extreme though, I'll just head to their territory from time to time and hunt a little. They have a large forest full of prey anyway, they wouldn't care too much.*

"Anyway, why is the camp so quiet?" Burntpaw asked, looking around. "What happened?"

"Well..." Snakepaw murmured, like she didn't want to change the subject so fast. But she shook her head and looked at him happily. "Ebonyheart's kits arrived! And they're so cute. You have to see them!"

Burntpaw blinked in surprise, but then he purred and nodded. Hoping that nobody else would notice his wound and the ThunderClan scent on him, he followed Snakepaw toward the nursery. He padded inside and he was suddenly hit with the warm scent of milk. He blinked longingly as he remembered the times when he used to sleep in the nursery. He looked over at Ebonyheart, who was looking at her kits with a tired expression. Sootblossom was sitting next to her, looking at the kits proudly.

Sootblossom raised his head and purred. "Hello, Snakepaw, Burntpaw! Came to see Ebonyheart's new kits, did you?"

"Yes!" Snakepaw nodded and sat down, looking at the kits. "They're so adorable!"

Burntpaw sat down next to her and looked at the kits. Happiness surged through him as he gazed at the kits. Three tiny kits lay at

Ebonyheart's belly. One was white with dark blue-gray dapples, one was black with pale gray spots and ginger ears, and one was gray-and-white. *They're so small! I promise to always be there for you and protect you, little ones.*

"They're so cute and so small!" Burntpaw murmured, then he raised his head. "What are their names?"

"Well, the white tom with blue-gray dapples is Bluekit," Ebonyheart meowed, looking at the kit she named. "The black she-kit with pale gray spots and ginger ears is Breezekit, and the gray-and-white tom is Cloudkit."

"Beautiful names, it fits them." Snakepaw purred and crouched by her new siblings, flicking her tail happily. "I can't wait for them to open their eyes!"

"Me too!" Burntpaw agreed and looked at them, purring, but before he could say anything else, a yowl came from somewhere in the camp.

"Let all cats old enough to lurk in the shadows gather beneath the Shaderock for a Clan meeting!"

Burntpaw turned his head, tilting his head. Sootblossom purred. "Come on, you two go to the meeting and let Ebonyheart rest. I'll join you soon."

Burntpaw nodded and got up, padding outside. He rushed over to the meeting and sat down, joined soon by Snakepaw and Sootblossom.

When everyone gathered around, Bumblestar began speaking. "First, I want to welcome Ebonyheart's new kits into the Clan. The time will pass fast, and before we know it, they will be apprentices." He then nodded toward Snakepaw and Burntpaw.

"Second, two apprentices are ready to become warriors." Bumblestar meowed. "Stormpaw and Pricklepaw, step forward."

Burntpaw watched the two toms step forward. Stormpaw was holding his tail high proudly, while Pricklepaw looked half excited,

half tired. *He looks like he doesn't even want to be there!*

"Do you two promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Bumblestar asked.

Burntpaw froze, the leader's question triggering the thoughts and emotions he'd had today.

"I do!" Stormpaw promised.

"I do." Pricklepaw meowed.

"Then, by the powers of StarClan, I will give you your warrior names." Bumblestar meowed. "Stormpaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Stormfleck."

"Pricklepaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Prickleshadow." Bumblestar continued, flicking his tail.

"Stormfleck! Prickleshadow!" The Clan chanted.

"Meeting dismissed." Bumblestar meowed and jumped down from the Shaderock.

"I can't believe that they're already warriors!" Snakepaw exclaimed, looking at Burntpaw. "One day, we'll be up there and become warriors, too! I can't wait! I wonder what my warrior name will be! Snakeheart, Snakepath..."

Burntpaw stopped paying attention to Snakepaw, instead looking at his paws as thoughts swirled in his mind. *But... if I want to mess with ThunderClan even just a little, am I still a true ShadowClan cat that wants to protect and defend his Clan?*

Chapter 8

A few moons passed since Ebonyheart's new kits were born and since Stormfleck and Prickleshadow became warriors. Both Burntpaw and Snakepaw were almost ready to take their assessments, and they were very excited for their warrior ceremonies.

Burntpaw followed Needlerose back to camp, carrying a frog and a lizard. He approached the fresh-kill pile and dropped the prey, looking at it. *There's a lot of prey in the pile. We'll eat well today!*

Needlegaze approached him and looked at him warmly. "If you continue like this, you'll become a warrior very soon! Well done!"

"Thank you!" Burntpaw dipped his head toward his mentor, then he looked around, surprised that Snakepaw didn't come greet him when he entered the camp. He didn't see her anywhere, either. He blinked. "Where's Snakepaw?"

"Oh! Well..." Needlerose murmured, flicking her tail. "She... Well..."

"She what?" Burntpaw looked at his mentor, his heart aching at the thought of what Needlerose might say.

"Well... earlier this morning, Snakepaw left with her parents to spend some time together, and they said they'll be back soon." Needlerose looked at her paws, looking hesitant. "They took Bluekit, Cloudkit, and Breezekit too, and even though it's dangerous for them to be out of camp, Sootblossom said that their family sometimes spends time together for a few days away from camp."

"*What?*" Burntpaw's face went pale with shock, his heart beating rapidly against his chest. "And they didn't invite me?"

"Well... you're not exactly part of the family..." Needlerose murmured, although she instantly seemed to realize what she said, her eyes widening with shock. "Wait, I didn't mean... I meant... I'm

sure Ebonyheart and Sootblossom love you like a son, and Snakepaw didn't look happy that they didn't invite you, either."

Burntpaw lashed his tail, scowling. *Oh, I'm not part of the family, then?*

"And when will they be back?" Burntpaw asked, twitching his ears irritably.

"They didn't say exactly when, but they shouldn't take more than a couple of days." Needlerose meowed, then sighed. "Listen, Burntpaw, I know you're probably upset about this, and I'm sorry for what I said, but-"

"Forget it." Burntpaw growled and stalked out of camp. "I've heard enough."

Needlerose opened her jaws to say something, but then she closed them and sighed, padding away with her head lowered.

Burntpaw stomped toward ThunderClan's territory, baring his teeth. *Sootblossom and Ebonyheart may love me like a son, but obviously not enough to invite me to their "alone family-only thing". That's so toad-brained! Who came up with this?*

Burntpaw raised his head to look at ThunderClan's territory, growling. He stepped on the Thunderpath, anger surging through his fur. He quickly crossed the Thunderpath and trespassed into ThunderClan's territory, deciding to take his anger out on them. He let out an irritated hiss and unsheathed his claws, digging them in the dirt. *I don't understand! I'm still part of their family, even if I'm not their biological kit! Or am I... not good enough?*

Burntpaw suddenly paused, looking at his paws and trembling. *Maybe they don't think I'm good enough to be part of their family. And that's why they didn't invite me, so they don't have to put up with me any longer.*

"You again?"

Burntpaw raised his head and growled with annoyance when three ThunderClan cats approached him. He recognized Blazesong,

although he didn't know who the other two cats were.

"What do you want and why are you here?" A pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples stepped forward, her yellow eyes shining with irritation.

"Wait a moment. Petalmist, remember when I told you about a ShadowClan apprentice that trespassed and attacked Jaggedriver?" Blazesong looked at the pale cream-and-white she-cat, sighing. "That's him."

A very dark ginger tom with a black stripe running down his spine looked at him, annoyed. "What do you want this time? Go away!"

Burntpaw's fur bristled. "It's none of your business."

"But you're on *our* territory, mouse-brain!" The dark ginger tom growled, unsheathing his claws. "If you don't leave, I'll-"

"You'll what?" Burntpaw challenged him, snarling. "You're just a pathetic ThunderClan warrior like that toad-brained Jaggedriver who only cares about himself."

"How dare you?" Petalmist growled and unsheathed her claws, but before she or Blazesong could do anything, the very dark ginger tom jumped on Burntpaw and pinned him down, baring his teeth. Burntpaw blinked in surprise, but he raked his claws across the warrior's legs and pushed him off of him.

The warrior fell backwards and Burntpaw jumped to his paws, baring his teeth. He lunged forward, but before he could reach the ThunderClan tom, Petalmist threw herself at him and slammed into him, making him lose his balance and collapse. She raked her claws across Burntpaw's right side as deeply as she could. The ShadowClan apprentice let out a pained yowl and spun around, but then Petalmist dodged and raked her claws across Burntpaw's left shoulder, growling. Burntpaw yowled in pain and swiftly turned around, biting Petalmist's white paw. The ThunderClan warrior let out a shriek and started blindly clawing the air.

"Enough!" Blazesong yowled, raking her claws across Burntpaw's

cheek. The tom let out a cry as a scorching pain shot through his face and let go of Petalmist's paw, who stumbled backwards. Blazesong stared at him. "Petalmist, Addersnarl, go back to camp and report this to Snailstar *now*."

The two warriors nodded and turned around, sprinting back to their camp. Burntpaw looked after them, snarling, then he heard Blazesong's hiss and he turned his head to look at her.

"Are you *out* of your *mind*, you stupid ShadowClan apprentice?" Blazesong's fur bristled as she bared her teeth. "Who do you think you are to waltz in our territory like you own the place and insult us? Typical ShadowClan! Do they not teach their apprentices manners anymore?"

Burntpaw growled, his fur bristling. "Don't blame the whole ShadowClan! Blame me. I'm the only one who came here." He muttered, feeling slightly guilty, but he quickly pushed it away.

"Yes, but you're part of ShadowClan, aren't you?" Blazesong growled. "And besides, what did ThunderClan ever do to you?"

Burntpaw huffed. "The scar on my eye?"

"Yes, and Jaggedriver was punished for that!" Blazesong spat. "You have to get over it. You can't keep coming here, insult and annoy us, then leave and expect your scar to disappear. That won't fix anything."

"You're lying." Burntpaw hissed. "Jaggedriver wasn't punished."

"How do you know?" Blazesong lashed her tail.

"I saw him on a patrol the day after the Gathering! It's obvious he wasn't punished!" Burntpaw growled. "You didn't care about what he did at all!"

"StarClan give me patience." Blazesong sighed and rolled her eyes. "He was. He wasn't allowed to leave the camp and he was given apprentice duties for a moon. But we couldn't have one less warrior to patrol, so he was only allowed to leave the camp to patrol. Satisfied?"

Burntpaw stared at her and lashed his tail, feeling slightly embarrassed. "I guess."

"Good, now leave and *don't* come back. And get your wounds checked on, they looks nasty." Blazesong spat and turned around, padding away.

Burntpaw stuck his tongue out at her and got up, then let out a shriek as he collapsed when he put pressure on his leg with the injured shoulder. *Great.*

Burntpaw got up and kept his paw off the ground. He limped to the Thunderpath and looked both ways, but when he didn't see any monsters coming, he limped quickly to the other side. When he got back on ShadowClan's territory, he lay down and rolled around, trying to get the ThunderClan scent off him, and then he got up and limped back to camp.

While he was trying to come up with an excuse for his injuries, Needlerose ran toward him. "Great StarClan! What happened to you, Burntpaw?"

"Oh." Burntpaw looked at his mentor and blinked, feeling slightly ashamed. "Well, I... I went on a walk to clear my thoughts, and I stumbled across a rogue. He didn't put up too much of a fight, but he managed to injure my shoulder well enough so that I can't walk on that foot. He gave me a few other wounds, but they're not serious."

Needlerose sighed. "Guess we're going to have to rename you Injury-receivingpaw. Come on, let's get you to the medicine cats."

Burntpaw nodded and limped after Needlerose. They walked through the thorn tunnel and into the camp. He was aware of his Clanmates looking at him and whispering, but he ignored them. He twitched his ears in annoyance. *Please stop talking about me.*

Needlerose stopped by the medicine cats' den and Burntpaw limped inside, looking around. Flintpaw was sitting by the pool of water on the far side of the den, but he turned his head when Burntpaw approached him.

"Flintpaw? Where's Fawnwhisper?" Burntpaw asked him, confused.

"She left to gather some herbs a while ago. Also, I'm... I'm Flintdusk now. I got my medicine cat name last night." The medicine cat apprentice whispered, looking as if he was hesitant to correct Burntpaw.

The ShadowClan apprentice blinked, confused, but he shrugged it off. "Well, I left to walk for a little bit, and I encountered a rogue on our territory. He didn't fight back too much, but he injured my shoulder and it hurts if I step on that foot." Burntpaw explained and limped toward a nest, sitting down slowly. He let out a hiss of pain as he accidentally put pressure on his wounded leg. "And that rogue also injured my right side pretty badly. That wound is starting to hurt."

Flintdusk nodded and padded toward him, inspecting his wounds. After a few heartbeats, he let out a sigh. "You know what I'm going to say next, right?"

"That I'll get two new scars?" Burntpaw growled. "I know." *Great, three scars from ThunderClan. I really need to practice my fighting skills, for StarClan's sake!*

"The wounds don't look too serious, I don't really know why they will leave scars. I guess you just get scars more easily than other cats. Well, at least the other cats will think that you fight a lot for your Clan." Flintdusk purred and turned around, padding toward his herbs. He grabbed a few herbs and held them gently, then he turned and padded toward him. "This might hurt a little, as you already know. But it won't hurt as bad as the last time, I promise."

Burntpaw nodded and closed his eyes, expecting for his wounds to start stinging horribly, but he didn't feel anything. He blinked his eyes open and saw that Flintdusk was already chewing the herbs and putting the poultice on his wounds, but he didn't feel anything. His wounds started aching a little after a while, but it wasn't unbearable. *Maybe I won't have new scars, after all.*

After a while, Flintdusk backed off. "All right, I'm done. I noticed that the rogue also clawed your cheek, but that's nothing serious.

You're free to go, but take it easy on your leg for a few days and don't put too much pressure on it. I'll tell Needlerose to go easy on you for now."

Burntpaw nodded and got up. "Thanks, Flintdusk." He meowed, then turned around and limped out of the medicine cats' den, heading toward the fresh-kill pile. He lay down and picked out a squirrel, biting down on it hungrily. He sighed, trying to ignore the aching sensation from his wounds. *It's not that bad, I guess. I can live with it. I wonder what Snakepaw and her family are doing now...*

Chapter 9

Three days passed since Burntpaw received two more scars and since Snakepaw and her family left to spend time together. A while after he came back to camp from ThunderClan's territory, Snailstar came to ShadowClan to speak with Bumblestar about what Burntpaw did, and now the apprentice was punished. Similar to Jaggedriver's punishment, he got a long scolding from the leader, and he was only allowed to leave camp in order to patrol and to train for half a moon, and he had to take care of the elders daily. All of his wounds had healed, and now Burntpaw had three scars. One on his left eye, one on his left shoulder, and one on his right side.

Burntpaw followed Needlerose back to camp, carrying a squirrel and lashing his tail tip with irritation. He padded toward the fresh-kill pile and dropped the prey in the pile. He looked toward his mentor, but she avoided his gaze. After a few heartbeats, she sighed.

"You're going to become a warrior soon, Burntpaw. But if you'll continue going in ThunderClan's territory for no reason at all, you won't become a warrior, or even be a real one." Needlerose warned, twitching her tail.

Burntpaw's eyes widened in surprise and he opened his jaws to say something, but Needlerose turned around and padded away before he had a chance to. The dark ginger tom looked after her and he turned around. *As if she ever got a scar for no reason! She doesn't know how I feel.*

Burntpaw looked through the fresh-kill pile and grabbed two fat crows. He then turned around and stomped toward the elders' den, twitching his gray tail with irritation. He padded underneath the thick branches and looked around.

"Oh, hello Burntpaw!" Brokenflower's voice came from somewhere near him. Burntpaw turned his head and saw the ginger-brown

elder look at him from right next to him. "Sorry, I've moved my nest near the entrance. I know that leaf-fall is nearly over, but I like the colder nights and I don't want to move my nest farther into the den."

Lightskip huffed. "Brokenflower, you're going to get sick, for StarClan's sake!"

"I won't." Brokenflower rolled her eyes.

"Well, don't blame me when I'll have to tell Fawnwhisper and Flintdusk to treat you after you get sick." Lightskip snapped, then looked at Burntpaw. "Anyway, what do you want?"

Burntpaw blinked. "Well, I came to check on you. Here." The tom dropped a crow near Lightskip's paws, then he turned and dropped the other one near Brokenflower. He stepped backwards to let the elders eat.

"Thank you!" Brokenflower dipped her head and lowered her head to eat. Lightskip simply nodded and quickly began eating her prey.

"Is there something else you want me to do?" Burntpaw asked, then hesitated. "I could check for ticks."

"Well, for one, I'm fine." Lightskip nodded. "Thank you, though."

Brokenflower dipped her head. "I'm fine as well. Thank you for the prey, Burntpaw. But you know, I was just like you when I was younger. Adventurous and careless. But that can be dangerous. Look where that got me."

Burntpaw blinked. "But didn't you say that a fox attacked your patrol? How could that be your fault?"

"It did! But that's not the thing. It was my fault I lost my leg, I took way too many risks that day." Brokenflower meowed and looked up at him. "I just went straight for the fox and fought carelessly, not thinking about the consequences. I lost my leg that day, yes, but I might also have saved my Clanmates' lives. Be careful on what choices you make, Burntpaw. All choices have consequences, but not all of them end badly."

Burntpaw blinked in surprise, and dipped his head. "Thank you, Brokenflower. Anyway, I should go. Snakepaw might come back today, and I want to be there to greet her."

The elder dipped her head and continued eating. Burntpaw turned around and padded out of the elders' den, looking around. He was saddened when he didn't see Snakepaw or her family in camp yet, but he was still hopeful that his friend would come back today. *I wonder where she went. I haven't seen her anywhere in the territory.*

Burntpaw sat down near the apprentices' den and started washing himself while listening to his Clanmates talk all around him. He could hear Prickleshadow and Stormfleck arguing about something again, and he rolled his eyes. He saw Pebblewhisper demonstrating a battle move to Owlsight and boasting about it.

Suddenly, someone crashed into Burntpaw and pinned him to the ground. The dark ginger apprentice let out a shriek as he collapsed on his back and he started blindly clawing the air, then looked up at his attacker, baring his teeth. He was shocked to see Snakepaw looking down at him, her eyes blazing with anger.

"Snakepaw!" Burntpaw exclaimed. "What are you doing?"

But Snakepaw ignored him. Instead, she hissed and lashed her tail. "You went back in ThunderClan's territory, didn't you? How *could* you? You have three scars now, thanks to your stupidity! And who knows how many more times you'll get hurt before you stop?"

"What?" Burntpaw blinked, but then growled and pushed Snakepaw off him, jumping back on his paws. "Hey! *You* were the one that left us for three days! You could have *died*!

Snakepaw hissed and got up, shaking her pelt. "Yeah? Well, at least I would have died on *my* Clan's territory! Unlike *someone*!"

Burntpaw lashed his tail and unsheathed his claws. "What's wrong with you? Besides, I'm still alive, as you can well see. You left me for three days, Snakepaw! And you didn't even say anything!"

"I left to spend time alone with my family, you toad-brain!"

Snakepaw growled.

Burntpaw narrowed his eyes. "And yet you didn't invite me. I'm still part of the family, Snakepaw. Or at least I thought I was."

Snakepaw hesitated before speaking again, looking uncomfortable. Before she could say anything, however, Bluekit, her younger brother, padded toward them with flattened ears. "Why are you two fighting? Please stop!"

Irritated at being interrupted and already upset, Burntpaw turned his head to look at the kit, snarling. "Leave us alone, you useless flea-pelt!"

Bluekit flinched, looking shocked. Snakepaw immediately stepped between them, her eyes flashing with anger. "Wow, look at you! Insulting a kit for no reason! Great job, Burntpaw!"

Suddenly, Burntpaw realized what he said and felt guilty. He took a deep breath and looked at the kit to apologize, but before he could say anything, Snakepaw grabbed a stick from near her paw and started pinching him with it. Burntpaw growled and looked back at Snakepaw, then he rushed forward and managed to take the stick from her, snapping it in two with a quick bite and glaring at the tortoiseshell she-cat as the broken pieces fell around his paws.

Snakepaw growled with irritation as she took a step back. "I swear, Burntpaw! You can't keep on trespassing into ThunderClan's territory for no reason! You might get *killed* there eventually! And who's fault will that be? Yours!"

Burntpaw lashed his tail, hissing. "It wasn't *my* fault that Jaggedriver attacked me that day! I just wanted a bit of revenge! And if what I did was wrong, so are your actions! Again, you left us for *three days* without telling me, or any of the others, *anything*!"

Hate and anger flashed in Snakepaw's pale amber eyes. She took a step forward and snapped her fangs dangerously close to his face, which made him jump back. "Well, you're just *jealous* that I have a family and you *don't*! That's all!"

Burntpaw's heart dropped and he choked from shock, staring at his friend in disbelief. Snakepaw lashed her tail and snarled, then turned and stomped away. Ebonyheart, who, until then, was standing a couple steps away with her young kits and watching them, took a step forward, then stopped and looked at Burntpaw, then at Snakepaw, as if she was unsure who to comfort. Then, she sighed and padded after Snakepaw, keeping her head low.

Burntpaw growled. *Of course, go comfort her instead! She's your kit, after all, and I'm not!* Burntpaw got up, still trembling from Snakepaw's harsh reply, and then he turned around, fully aware of his Clanmates watching him and Snakepaw in shock and distaste. But before he could move, he heard a voice call out from behind him.

"Burntpaw, wait!"

The apprentice turned around, somewhat hoping to see Snakepaw, but he huffed in frustration when he saw Sootblossom instead. The black-and-ginger tom was rushing toward him, his eyes wide with distress.

"What do you want? Go comfort your daughter or take care of your kits or something. Leave me alone." Burntpaw growled and turned his head.

"Burntpaw, please listen." Sootblossom rushed in front of him to block his way, looking at him sadly. "I'm sorry that we didn't invite you, but it was an only-family thing. It's been like this since my grandparents were kits. I don't know why or how they came up with this, but we've always respected this. Once every few moons, we all leave the Clan for a few days to spend some time together away from the territories. And this time, I... didn't know what else to do. We would have invited you too, but-"

"But I'm not apart of the family. I get it." Burntpaw hissed and looked at his paws, feeling overwhelmed with sorrow and hate. It felt as if his heart was breaking in two, his fur hot from embarrassment and adrenaline. The world felt as if it came crushing down on him and the ground was falling apart underneath his paws.

Sootblossom shook his head. He stared at the apprentice with a gaze that looked like regret. It was as if he knew he messed up, but didn't know how to apologize properly or what to say. "Burntpaw, listen, me and Ebonyheart will forever love you like our son, and I'm so sorry. It was wrong of us to not invite you, and... oh, forget it, we'll talk about this later. Burntpaw, your argument with Snakepaw was unnecessary! It was extremely wrong of you to trespass into ThunderClan's territory like that, yes, but this can't be the end of your friendship with Snakepaw! You're siblings, you can't stop talking to each other over an argument! Please, go talk things through with her!"

Burntpaw turned his head to look at Snakepaw, who was walking out of camp with Ebonyheart. He bared his teeth and growled. "No. If she wants us to be friends again, then she should apologize first, and be the first one to speak. She started the argument, after all. But for now, our friendship is *over*. And as for us being siblings?" He took a deep breath, his words sounding as if they were being forced out of his throat. "No, we're not. You all decided we weren't when you left without even telling me anything first. I was simply just a scrawny, abandoned kit you took care of because you had no other choice."

Chapter 10

Burntpaw opened his eyes and yawned. He got up and stretched as sunlight entered the apprentices' den and dappled the ground. Burntpaw looked around, surprised that Snakepaw wasn't in her nest, but then he growled and walked out. *Why should I care?*

Burntpaw looked around and spotted Needlerose by the nursery. He rushed toward his mentor and looked up at her. "Needlerose! What are we doing today?"

Needlerose looked at him. "Oh, Burntpaw! Well, today I want to test your fighting skills. You did get a lot of scars when you kept going in ThunderClan's territory, so I want to see if there's any way to improve your fighting skills."

Burntpaw growled, unsure if that was a harsh remark or a joke. But he just nodded and followed Needlerose out of camp, twitching his gray tail from irritation. The birds started chirping and the sun was just peeking over the horizon, its rays hurting Burntpaw's eyes. The tom blinked, trying to get used to the light. He followed Needlerose to a clearing not far from camp. The ground was covered with moss and he could see a few pinecones here and there, and he hissed at the thought of accidentally stepping on them. He raised his head to look at his mentor.

Needlerose backed off and nodded. "All right. Attack me, but keep your claws sheated."

Burntpaw nodded and sprinted toward Needlerose. He jumped on her back and quickly pinned her to the ground, but he was too slow. Needlerose instantly started rolling around, but Burntpaw jumped off the she-cat before she could squash him. The silver she-cat with gray stripes got up, and Burntpaw instantly rushed toward her, crashing into her. Needlerose let out a surprised shriek as she collapsed on her side.

Burntpaw quickly spun around and put his paws on Needlerose's shoulders, not letting her get up. After a bit of struggling, the she-cat nodded and looked satisfied. "Very well. Now let me get up, for StarClan's sake!"

The tom nodded and backed off. Needlerose got up, and without saying anything, she ran toward Burntpaw and tried to jump on top of him to pin him down, but the tom was too quick. Burntpaw ran to the sides and Needlerose fell on the ground with a thump. Burntpaw quickly spun around and, before the she-cat could get up, he pinned her down and pawed her belly as if he was scratching her. Needlerose nodded. "Not bad!"

Burntpaw backed off once again, letting Needlerose get up. "You were very fast, Burntpaw. I tried using the element of surprise on you, but you were paying attention and reacted well. Let's continue."

Burntpaw padded back to camp, exhausted. He and Needlerose had been training for a while, and now the sun was at its highest spot in the sky. He huffed and padded over to the fresh-kill pile. He picked a frog from there and sat down to eat.

Then, he heard paw steps. He raised his head and hissed when he saw Snakepaw emerge from the thorn tunnel. The she-cat looked up and hissed back at him, then walked another way so she wouldn't walk by him. Frostedwillow, Snakepaw's mentor, let out an exasperated hiss and padded toward Smokedream.

"Burntpaw. Hi."

Burntpaw blinked and turned his head, seeing Breezekit approach him. The black she-kit with pale gray spots lowered her head when she approached him, twitching her tiny ginger ears. The tom blinked. "Oh! Uh. Hi, Breezekit."

Breezekit hesitated, then looked up. "Will you and Snakepaw please be friends again? You two were very close before, just like me and my siblings, and I don't like to see you two avoiding each other."

Burntpaw blinked in surprise when he heard Breezekit's words. He

twitched his tail, feeling uncomfortable. "Well..." He hesitated.

"Please?" Breezekit looked at him sadly. "You're like an older brother to me and my siblings, and even though you're not related to us by blood, we were raised by the same parents. I... actually really missed you during those few days."

Burntpaw's heart melted as he heard Breezekit's words. He did miss Snakepaw, in one way or another, but he wasn't sure if he could mend his friendship with her. Or if he wanted to. *Snakepaw's words really hurt me, and she still does her best to avoid me... I'm not sure we can still be friends after that.*

"All right, I'll... I'll do what I can." Burntpaw tried to sound reassuring, but then he tried changing the subject. "Er... how's Bluekit?"

Breezekit's ears twitched, then she looked back at her ginger paws. "He's fine, but he's kind of scared of you. I think you should apologize to him." She fell silent.

Burntpaw blinked, then purred. "Yeah, well... I'll try. Thanks, Breezekit! Come on, go play with Cloudkit, all right? I'll apologize to Bluekit."

Breezekit nodded and turned, padding away. Burntpaw quickly finished his crow and got up, hesitantly approaching Bluekit. He looked at the white kit with blue-gray dapples. "Bluekit?"

Bluekit looked up, his yellow eyes widening with surprise. "Oh, Burntpaw! H-Hi." He stammered, taking a step back.

Burntpaw hesitated, then sat down and sighed, feeling guilty. "Listen, I'm sorry for what I said to you yesterday. It wasn't okay. I was upset, but it's not an excuse. You're... you're not an useless flea-pelt, I promise. I don't mean that. I'm so, so sorry." He murmured, hoping the kit would accept his apology.

"Oh." Bluekit blinked, looking surprised. "It's... it's fine, I think." He nodded. He brightened up slightly, which relieved Burntpaw.

"Hey! Stay away from my sibling!" Snakepaw suddenly hissed and

rushed toward them, stepping between them.

Burntpaw blinked and stared at her, then growled and got up. "Fine, I was just apologizing to him. You don't have to be so protective!"

"I'm protecting him from the cat who insulted him, thank you very much." Snakepaw spat, growling.

Burntpaw hissed, but he didn't say anything else. Frustrated, he turned and stomped toward the apprentices' den. He sat down and rolled his eyes, irritated.

"Things aren't looking well between you and Snakepaw, and that's not good." Stormfleck hesitantly approached him and sat down next to him. "You shouldn't let that argument make you two enemies. You were so close before!"

"That's basically what Sootblossom told me." Burntpaw rolled his eyes. "But what exactly do you want me to do? Snakepaw gets all defensive when I approach her or her family. She's acting as if I'm going to bite their heads off!"

"You're right." Stormfleck murmured thoughtfully and looked at Snakepaw, who was talking with Bluekit quietly. He sighed. "Well, whatever you do, just remember that she's still upset from the argument. You are too, it seems, but once you've both calmed down, you two will become friends again. Trust me, I know how arguments are and how they end up."

"I guess." Burntpaw shrugged. "But it doesn't seem like we'll ever be friends again. She's *very* upset."

"Well, you know how close me and Prickleshadow are, and yet we argued a lot. And trust me, *a lot*. And we still do." Stormfleck meowed, looking at the apprentice calmly. "But we always apologized to each other. He's pretty grumpy, but he's still my friend, and I would never want a simple argument to turn us into enemies."

Burntpaw sighed. "I guess. I have no idea what to say to Snakepaw,

though, but I guess I'll wait a bit before I do anything else. I'll just give her some time to calm down."

"That's the best thing you can do, honestly." Stormfleck nodded, then got up. "Anyway, I have to go now, sorry Burntpaw. Smokedream wanted me for a patrol. See you later!"

"Bye!" Burntpaw said and watched the blue-gray tabby tom rush toward a few cats waiting by the thorn tunnel. He then turned his head and looked at his light ginger paws, sighing.

I feel horrible about what I said during that argument and how it all ended up, but... Snakepaw didn't have to be so harsh, did she? Although... I think she's right. Maybe this entire ThunderClan thing will get me killed one day. And... maybe I am a bit jealous of her that she has a family. I wish I wasn't.

Chapter 11

Burntpaw rushed through the thorn tunnel, holding his gray tail high proudly. *I can't believe I just passed my assessment! I'm finally going to become a warrior!*

He padded toward the fresh-kill pile and dropped the prey he caught during his assessment. Needlerose walked after him and nodded proudly. "Well done, Burntpaw! I'll go ahead and tell Bumblestar that you're ready to become a warrior."

Burntpaw nodded, excited, and watched his mentor walk toward the leader's den. He then heard paw steps and he turned around. He hissed in irritation when he saw Frostedwillow and Snakepaw walk back in camp. *Of course, she's also going to become a warrior. Great. That won't be awkward at all.*

Burntpaw padded away before the two she-cats could approach him and he sat down near the apprentices' den, looking toward the Shaderock. Suddenly, he felt someone walk past him and he turned his head in a panic, but relaxed when he saw that it was only Stormfleck and Prickleshadow.

"Hello, Burntpaw!" Stormfleck meowed and sat down next to him. "Me and Prickleshadow just moved Snakepaw's and your nests in the warriors' den, since you'll be sleeping there starting tomorrow. Are you ready to become a warrior?"

"Yes, very!" Burntpaw purred. "I wonder what my warrior name will be!"

"Oh, I bet Bumblestar will name you Burntscar, after your scars." Prickleshadow teased, flicking his tail. "You did get a few scars in your apprenticeship, and some cats don't even get one during their entire life. For example, me!"

"Oh, shut up!" Stormfleck rolled his eyes and nudged Prickleshadow, then looked at Burntpaw. "Well, whatever you

warrior name is, I'm sure you'll be proud of it."

Burntpaw nodded. "I guess, but I'm scared to sit vigil with Snakepaw. We've been completely avoiding each other lately, and we probably will for the rest of our lives."

Stormfleck sighed. "I know, but you really shouldn't. You two used to be-"

"Very close, I know." Burntpaw interrupted him and rolled his eyes, irritated. "But it's not my fault that she decided to start an argument! She threw some pretty harsh words at me, too."

"Yeah, about that, it was pretty amazing." Prickleshadow chuckled.

"Hey!" Burntpaw growled at the speckled brown tom.

"Sorry." The warrior mumbled.

"Let all cats old enough to lurk in the shadows gather beneath the Shaderock for a Clan meeting!" Bumblestar suddenly yowled.

Burntpaw turned his head and saw the yellow leader with black stripes standing on the Shaderock. He instantly jumped up and walked over there. "It's time!" He whispered to himself, feeling excitement rush through him. He couldn't wait!

Burntpaw sat down, joined soon by Stormfleck and Prickleshadow. He looked up, but his fur suddenly started tingling. He felt as if he was being watched. Blinking, he turned his head and saw Snakepaw stare anxiously at him. However, when she saw his head turn, she growled and turned her head to look at Bumblestar again. Burntpaw rolled his eyes, annoyed, then looked back at the leader.

"Today, two apprentices are ready to become warriors." Bumblestar meowed when everyone gathered around. "Burntpaw and Snakepaw, step forward!"

Burntpaw felt like his stomach turned upside down when he stepped forward along with Snakepaw. He tried to avoid looking at her, but he could still see her tortoiseshell pelt with the corner of his eye.

Bumblestar sighed, but continued speaking. "Do you two promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your lives?" He asked.

"I do!" Snakepaw promised.

Burntpaw hesitated, his mind wandering to his past adventures in ThunderClan's territory, but then he brushed it off. "I do!" He meowed. *I'm over that, I promise. I'll never do that ever again. I still don't think that what Jaggedriver did was right, but I definitely exaggerated. I'll mind my own business from now on, I swear.*

"Then, by the powers of StarClan, I will give you your warrior names." Bumblestar nodded. "Burntpaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Burnttail."

Burnttail! He thought, and he looked at his gray tail. *Well, it was pretty obvious that this was going to be my warrior name, but I'm not mad about it. I like it!*

"Snakepaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Snakesong." Bumblestar continued, then dipped his head to the two new warriors.

Burnttail couldn't help but turn his head to look at Snakesong. Her former friend was holding her head high, looking proud. He let out a short hiss and turned his head again, looking back at the leader.

"Burnttail! Snakesong!" The Clan chanted.

Burnttail purred and backed off, sitting next to Stormfleck again. He didn't think he ever felt prouder than he did now.

"Meeting dismissed." Bumblestar meowed and jumped off the Shaderock, then he turned around and padded toward Smokedream, his deputy.

"Well, your warrior name isn't Burntscar, but Burnttail is still pretty great." Prickleshadow meowed, looking at the new warrior. "Congratulations!"

"Yes, congratulations!" Stormfleck meowed, then purred. "Now go

sit vigil for a very cold and long leaf-fall night. Have fun!"

Burnttail grinned. "Thanks, I won't. Leaf-bare will be here soon, though, and that's even worse. I'm so glad I don't have to sit vigil during leaf-bare. I'd probably freeze forever!"

"You're right." Prickleshadow nodded. "Leaf-bare isn't fun at all. I'm definitely not looking forward to it."

Burnttail then dipped his head toward the two toms and turned around, but stopped when he saw Sootblossom and Ebonyheart approach him. He rolled his eyes.

"Congratulations!" Sootblossom dipped his head.

Ebonyheart purred warmly. "Congratulations! Your name suits you. I hope you're not upset about it." She said worriedly.

"I'm not, actually. Thank you." Burnttail growled, but then sighed and raised his head. *I have no reason to be mad at them. They've already apologized. I'll never forget what they did, but I can't keep on being upset forever.* "Anyway, I'll go eat something and then go sit vigil. See you!"

"Good luck, Burnttail!" Sootblossom meowed, looking relieved at his change of heart.

Burnttail got up and padded toward the fresh-kill pile and looked through it, then he picked up a frog and sat down, digging his fangs into it. He then looked around camp. Ebonyheart was padding back to the nursery, where Bluekit, Breezekit, and Cloudkit were playing with each other. Sootblossom quickly followed her. Fawnwhisper and Flintdusk were talking quietly near their den, and Smokedream was assigning patrols. Burnttail suddenly blinked as he saw Pebblewhisper and Owlsight talking together with their tails entwined. *Oh? ShadowClan might have new kits soon!*

After a while, Burnttail finished eating his frog and he got up, padding out of camp, still feeling hesitant. *I still haven't completed my punishment for going in ThunderClan's territory, but I can leave the camp now, right? I mean, wait, obviously. I have to sit vigil now. But I'm*

surprised Bumblestar didn't delay my warrior ceremony.

Burnttail pushed his way through the thorn tunnel and ducked to keep his head away from the sharp thorns, suddenly surprised at how tall he had gotten. *It feels like I was a kit just yesterday!* He padded outside and sat down right by the entrance and looked at the sky. The sun was starting to set, and a few stars were already shining brightly on the darkening sky. After a few heartbeats, Snakesong padded out of the camp and joined him. She sat farther away from him and didn't look at him at all. Burnttail's heart jabbed with both sadness and irritation, but he didn't do or say anything. Soon, a cold breeze started ruffling his fur, and he started shivering from the cold.

Well, this is going to be a very cold and awkward night.

Allegiance Update: 2

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Smokedream** - Dark gray tom with pale blue eyes

Medicine cat: **Fawnwhisper** - Cream she-cat with white spots and black paws

Apprentice, Flintdusk - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Oakgaze** - Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Needlerose - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings

Frostedwillow - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Sootblossom - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Stormfleck - Blue-gray tabby tom

Prickleshadow - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Burnttail - Dark ginger tom with lighter paws, a brown belly and a gray tail with amber eyes

Snakesong - Tortoiseshell she-cat with pale amber eyes

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle

and black ears. Mother to Sootblossom's kits: Bluekit, a white tom with dark blue-gray dapples and yellow eyes, Cloudkit, a gray-and-white tom, and Breezekit, a black she-kit with pale gray spots and ginger ears and paws

Elders: **Brokenflower** - Ginger-brown she-cat with white paws and a missing leg

Lightskip - Cream-and-white she-cat

ThunderClan

Leader: **Snailstar** - Black-and-brown tom

Deputy: **Cloverwhisper** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Medicine cat: **Waspspark** - Tall gray tom with ginger spots

Apprentice, Eaglepaw - Brown tabby tom with white legs and a golden muzzle

Warriors: **Blazesong** - Ginger she-cat with gray stripes and a white belly with green eyes

Petalmist - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Apprentice, Emberpaw - Ginger tom with a white belly and dark amber eyes

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Toadpaw - Black tom with silver patches

Addersnarl - Very dark ginger tom with a black stripe running down his spine

Hazelfoot - Brown tom with a white leg

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Kestrelstrike - Mottled cream tom

Weaselfall - Ginger-and-white tom

Silentpetal - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes

Elders: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader: **Fernstar** - Gray tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: **Bearback** - Brown tom with black stripes

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Flowerwing** - Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Violetroar - Purplish-brown she-cat

Plumbreeze - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Birchwhistle - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Falconclaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Dawnpath - Ginger she-cat with white spots

Queens: **Mossripple** - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples. Mother to Birchwhistle's kits: Lightkit, a pale brown she-kit with a white belly and muzzle, Maplekit, a gray-and-brown tabby she-kit, and Robinkit, a brown-and-white tom with gray speckles

Elders: **Bramblefrost** - Pale brown tabby tom with icy-blue eyes

RiverClan

Leader: **Frecklestar** - Brown-and-cream she-cat with black spots on

her face

Deputy: **Troutpatch** - Gray tom with black dapples and green eyes

Medicine cat: **Lilacheart** - Black-and-silver tabby she-cat

Apprentice, Briarpond - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Tornfeather** - Black tom with a short tail

Swiftbrook - Gray she-cat with long legs

Berryfeather - Pale ginger she-cat

Bouldershade - Black tom

Whitealder - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Dogspot - Pale brown she-cat with black spots and white paws

Spiderfrost - Black-and-white tom with a reddish belly

Spottedfur - Black she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Queens: **Nettlebrook** - Cream-and-white she-cat. Expecting Whitealder's kits

Elders: **Goosepath** - Gray-and-white speckled tom

Aspenfeather - Brown tom with dark ginger markings

Whitewhisker - Pale gray-and-white tom with long whiskers

Chapter 12

Burnttail looked up as the sun was starting to rise above the horizon, its rays brightening the forest with a soft glow. He twitched his tail, feeling his eyes drop with exhaustion. *Does this mean that my vigil is over? I think so, but I'm not sure...*

Needlerose appeared right next to him and purred, looking at him. "Your vigils are over. Come on you two, go rest."

"Finally!" Snakesong's meow came from somewhere near Needlerose. Burnttail raised his head and saw the tortoiseshell she-cat stretch. "I'm so tired!"

"I can't wait to sleep." Burnttail meowed and got up, shaking out his fur as he turned around. Oakgaze, Stormfleck, and Pigeonswoop were standing behind Needlerose, looking at the two new warriors curiously.

"You two have earned your rest, but remember that you're warriors now. You'll have to participate in plenty patrols from now on." Oakgaze warned, flicking his tail. "So go rest while you still can!"

"Don't scare them, Oakgaze." Pigeonswoop purred, then looked at the two new warriors. "Smokedream will make you go on more patrols, yes, but it won't be overwhelming. He's not the kind of deputy who overworks cats. Now come on, get back to your nests!"

Snakesong immediately rushed back in camp, her tortoiseshell tail disappearing in the warriors' den. Burnttail rolled his eyes and was ready to follow, but Stormfleck padded in front of him. "Remember that me and Prickleshadow moved your nest in the warriors' den yesterday, so you don't have to do it now. You're welcome!"

Burnttail blinked. "Oh, right, I forgot. Thanks!" He nodded gratefully, then padded back in camp, exhausted, and rushed in the

warriors' den. He looked around for his nest and sighed in relief when he saw that it wasn't close to Snakesong's, as the tortoiseshell warrior's nest was in the other corner of the den. The dark ginger tom curled up in his nest and closed his eyes, falling asleep almost instantly.

Burnttail yawned as he awoke, blinking a few times against the sunlight filtering through the den entrance. He raised his head and looked around the warriors' den, surprised to see that he was the only one there. He got up and stretched, then padded into the camp.

Everyone was awake by now, and the sun was at its highest spot. Burnttail shivered as the cold wind rushed through his fur. He huffed with irritation. *Well, what can I expect? Leaf-bare is almost here. I suppose I should start hunting more.*

"Burnttail! You finally woke up." Smokedream meowed with delight, padding toward him. "I want you to go on a hunting patrol with Owlsight and Frostedwillow. We need as much prey as we can find before leaf-bare arrives."

Thought this would happen soon. Burnttail dipped his head. "All right." He nodded, then turned and looked for the two warriors, noticing them standing by the camp entrance.

Frostedwillow raised her head as he approached them. "You're finally here! All right, follow me, both of you."

Burnttail nodded and followed Frostedwillow as she led them into the pine forest and toward a clearing where the ground was covered with moss. Burnttail blinked with confusion as he remembered that Needlerose took him here for training once. "Er, Frostedwillow? Isn't this clearing used for training?"

"Not always." Frostedwillow shook her head and looked around, sounding slightly irritated by the question. "We usually hunt here if there's no cat training, and prey often likes to hide here. Now, I want us to split up. Owlsight, you'll go left, and Burnttail, you'll go right. I'll search around the clearing, and then we'll meet back here."

Burnttail nodded and padded toward the right part of the clearing. He sniffed the air and twitched his ears, listening for any movement. He heard rustling and turned around slowly, noticing a squirrel nibbling at something on the ground not far from him. He tensed when he remembered blindly chasing another squirrel into ThunderClan's territory as an apprentice, which resulted in him receiving his first scar. He growled as he pushed the memory out of his mind, dropping into a crouch. *This time I'll be careful. That won't happen again.*

The squirrel didn't notice him. It was still busy munching on something that Burnttail couldn't see. He quietly creeped toward the prey, unsheathing his claws. Then, he quickly pounced at the squirrel and slashed his claws across its back. It instantly dropped dead, and he purred with pride. He picked it up and buried it close by. He sniffed the air again and soon caught a crow scent. He followed it, his tail twitching lightly.

The scent was leading further from the clearing, but Burnttail didn't see it as a problem. He kept following it until he was pretty close to the Carrionplace. He hesitated, not wanting to get too close, but felt relieved when he saw the crow on a rock just a couple steps away, cleaning its feathers busily. He crouched and creeped silently toward the rock. Then, when he was right next to it, he quickly raised an unsheathed front paw and dug his claws into the crow, jumping up and killing it with a quick bite. He grabbed it and padded back toward the clearing. *This should be enough,* I *think I'll go back now.*

Burnttail padded to where he buried the squirrel and dropped the crow. He then crouched down and started digging up the dirt quickly, picking up the squirrel once he saw it. He got up and grabbed the crow too, then he turned and padded back in the clearing, where he was supposed to meet with the others.

Owlsight was already waiting there, with two frogs and a sparrow at her paws. She turned her head and nodded at Burnttail. The tom nodded back and sat down, dropping the prey at his paws. "How did the hunt go?"

"Pretty good, but I almost lost this sparrow. It saw me at the last

second!" Owlsight sighed, flicking her tail dramatically. "Anyway, it's *very* cold, I can't wait for Frostedwillow to come back so we can go back to camp."

"It's not that bad." Burnttail shrugged, but still fluffed up his fur against the cold. "I don't like leaf-bare, though."

"Me neither." Owlsight agreed. "But I think Frostedwillow does. Her fur is mostly white, so it's easier for her to hunt in the snow. It's not the case yet, but she'll be happier to hunt once it starts snowing." She meowed, then raised her head. "Speaking of Frostedwillow, there she is!"

Burnttail turned his head and saw the white she-cat pad toward them, carrying two mice in her jaws and a frog on her back. She looked at their prey and nodded approvingly. "Good job, both of you! Now let's get these back to camp."

Burnttail nodded and got up, picking up his prey carefully. He then turned around and padded back to camp, followed by Owlsight and Frostedwillow. He rushed through the camp entrance and dropped his prey in the fresh-kill pile, yawning once he did so. Owlsight and Frostedwillow joined him, then murmured something to one another and walked off.

Burnttail shook out his fur, then looked around. He blinked when he saw Cloudkit, Bluekit, and Breezekit playing with each other, with Ebonyheart and Sootblossom watching them from the nursery entrance. But he didn't see Snakesong anywhere. He huffed and sat down. *Whatever, it's her problem. I don't care where she went. She's probably patrolling or something.*

"Oh, hello Burnttail!" Stormfleck meowed and padded toward him, sitting by his side. "How was your first patrol as a warrior?"

Burntail shrugged. "Pretty good, I guess. How was it back in camp, where it's warm and safe?"

Stormfleck purred in amusement. "Very good, but it's not really that warm here, either. Leaf-bare is arriving soon... can't say I'm excited about that. But I *am* excited about tonight's Gathering! Do

you think I'll go?"

"I'm not sure." Burnttail meowed. "But I think me and Snakesong will. We just became warriors, so we should. I wonder what happened in the other Clans during this last moon."

"Who knows? We'll see." Stormfleck meowed, then got up and stretched. "Anyway, I'll go and see if the elders need anything. We don't have apprentices anymore, so the younger warriors have to do apprentice duties until we have new apprentices. See you later, Burnttail!"

"All right, see you!" Burnttail meowed. Stormfleck got up and padded toward the elders' den. Burnttail looked after him until the blue-gray warrior disappeared in the den. Then, he turned his head and looked around the camp, thinking about tonight's Gathering. *I hope Bumblestar will let me go... I mean, I'm still punished, but I'm a warrior now... This punishment is almost over though, thank StarClan!*

Chapter 13

Burnttail followed his Clanmates toward Fourtrees as the cold leaf-bare wind rushed through his fur. It was the first day of leaf-bare, and even if it hadn't snowed yet, Burnttail was sure it would soon.

Bumblestar led his cats out of the secret underground tunnel, the Thunderpath being oddly quiet above them. Burnttail twitched his ears as he soon heard the voices of the other cats waiting at Fourtrees. Soon, Bumblestar stopped and looked around. Then, he raised his tail and the ShadowClan cats split up as they padded toward the other Clans. Burnttail quickly followed and looked around.

"Hello, Burntpaw!" Dawnpaw greeted and padded toward him, followed by Falconpaw.

Burnttail looked at them and nodded at his two WindClan friends. "Hello! But I'm Burnt*tail* now. I became a warrior two days ago." Burnttail corrected her, feeling proud.

"Congratulations!" Falconpaw meowed. "That name suits you- and I didn't mean it in a disrespectul way. We also got our warrior names! I'm Falconclaw now, and she's Dawnpath."

"Well, congratulations to you too!" Burnttail purred, then shivered from the cold. "I hope the Gathering will start soon, it's very cold here." He hissed as he fluffed out his fur.

"I hope so, too." Dawnpath muttered, then looked around. "By the way, where's Snakepaw?"

"What?" Burnttail blinked, then rolled his eyes as he looked around. He soon spotted the tortoiseshell she-cat speaking with a few RiverClan cats by one of the oak trees, and he pointed his gray tail toward her. "She's over there. And she also got her warrior name, Snakesong."

"I see." Falconclaw blinked, looking confused. "But you two are usually together at Gatherings. What happened?"

"Nothing." Burnttail hissed, feeling annoyed. *It's not your problem. Can the Gathering start already?*

Falconclaw opened his jaws to say something, but before he could, Fernstar's meow rang through the clearing. "Let the Gathering begin!"

Burnttail sighed in relief and sat down by his friends, looking at the leaders curiously.

Bumblestar got up and dipped his head toward the other leaders. "I'll start." He meowed, then he looked at the gathered cats. "Prey has been running well in ShadowClan despite the colder weather. We also have two new warriors with us, Burnttail and Snakesong."

Burnttail raised his head high with pride, then he lowered it again. He sneaked a glance at Snakesong, and he saw that the tortoiseshell she-cat looked proud too, but she seemed a little unsure of herself. He rolled his eyes and looked back at the leaders.

Bumblestar sat back down, and then Fernstar got up. "I'll continue, then. We also have two new warriors that joined us at the Gathering. Falconclaw and Dawnpath!"

"That's us!" Dawnpath whispered to Falconclaw. Burnttail looked at his friends, purring as he saw their eyes light up with pride and tails twitch excitedly.

Fernstar sat back down and Frecklestar got up, although the RiverClan she-cat looked conflicted. "We, like ShadowClan and WindClan, also have new warriors. Dogspot, Spiderfrost, and Spottedfur."

Burnttail looked around curiously for the three new warriors, but before he could find them, Frecklestar spoke again, her voice hesitant. "A few days ago, we were attacked by a rogue group. Our senior medicine cat, Lilacheart, and one of our elders, Aspenfeather, were killed. But thankfully we had no great injuries. We mourn our

fallen Clanmates and pray they reached StarClan safely."

Burnttail dipped his head in respect for the deceased cats, along with a few others, and then Frecklestar sat down, looking at her paws. Snailstar got up, flicking his tail. "I'm sorry to hear about what happened to RiverClan, but we must move on and be strong." He murmured, which made Frecklestar bare her fangs briefly. "ThunderClan has three new apprentices. Eaglepaw, Emberpaw, and Toadpaw, with Eaglepaw training to become our next medicine cat."

Snailstar looked at the three apprentices, who seemed to nearly jump out of their furs from joy, then continued speaking. "One of our warriors, Rosemeadow, has retired to the elders' den. That is all I had to say." He meowed, then sat back down.

Fernstar nodded. "Then, this Gathering is over! WindClan, let's go back to our camp."

Burnttail got up and dipped his head toward Falconclaw and Dawnpath. "That was one short Gathering, let's say. Congratulations again for your warrior names!"

"Thank you!" Dawnpath purred. "Congratulations for yours, too. We'll see you at the next Gathering!"

"All right, see you!" Burnttail meowed, then turned and rushed toward Bumblestar, who was already calling his cats over to him. Once everyone gathered around, Smokedream looked at his leader. "Bumblestar, everyone is here. We can go back."

Bumblestar nodded and started leading his cats back to their camp. Burnttail followed, yawning. *I'm pretty tired, I can't wait to get back in the warriors' den!*

The ShadowClan cats padded through the underground tunnel quickly. Burnttail froze as it suddenly started vibrating, a monster running above them with a loud roar. The sound ended as quickly as it came, and he ran after his Clanmates, who were already leaving the tunnel. When he got out, he looked around his territory. The forest was silent, with the moon floating peacefully above

them, ready to set. The pine trees stood tall, their leaves dark against the slowly brightening sky. Burnttail sighed in relief as he padded through the camp entrance, fluffing out his fur against the cold air.

Suddenly, Snakesong spun around and ran past Burnttail out into the forest. The tom turned around and tilted his head in confusion. *Where in StarClan's name is she going? Isn't she tired?* For a heartbeat, Burnttail wanted to follow her, but then he shook his head. *We're not friends anymore. It's her problem. I don't care where she goes, she's probably just leaving to hunt or take a walk or something like that.*

"Aren't you going to follow her?"

Burnttail blinked and turned around as Prickleshadow approached him curiously. He rolled his eyes. "Why should I?"

"Because she's your friend?" Prickleshadow tilted his head.

Burnttail hissed. "Not anymore, and you know that very well!"

Prickleshadow huffed. "You're a weird cat, Burnttail, but have it your way. Although *I* would follow Stormfleck if he suddenly bursted out of camp in the middle of the night for no reason."

"I'm sure Snakesong is fine, she probably just wanted to hunt or take a walk." Burnttail shrugged, then rolled his eyes and padded toward the warriors' den. *Can't he just leave me alone? I'm sick of cats trying to make me be friends with Snakesong again! It's not like I'm the one who ended our friendship. What are they expecting for me to tell her, anyway? That I'm sorry Jaggedriver attacked me for no reason? Sorry that I have a grudge against him? Yeah, right.*

Burnttail huffed in irritation, but he pushed the thoughts away and lay down in his nest. He rested his head on his paws and yawned as more cats entered the warriors' den. He closed his eyes and fell asleep as his Clanmates were murmuring quietly around him.

Chapter 14

A few moons passed since Burnttail and Snakesong became warriors. Since then, Burnttail only went back in ThunderClan's territory once, but he wasn't caught by any patrols and he only hunted one bird before growing bored and going back.

Burnttail shivered and looked at the camp entrance, twitching his tail excitedly as he prepared to leave in order to go back to ThunderClan's territory again. *Hopefully this time I'll meet Jaggedriver alone. Maybe I can give him a scar or two, like he did to me when I was an apprentice... that fox-hearted tom!*

Before he could leave camp, however, Ebonyheart's loud and panicked yowl suddenly rang through the camp. Burnttail twitched his ears and he spun around, taken aback.

The she-cat ran out of the warriors' den with a bristled fur and looked around, her eyes wide with panic. Burnttail rushed toward the queen. "Ebonyheart? What's wrong?"

As more cats started approaching to see what was happening, Ebonyheart raised her head, her eyes boring into him. "Burnttail! Do you know where Snakesong is?" She asked, looking slightly hopeful despite her trembling body.

Burnttail blinked, confused. "What? No, actually. Why?"

Ebonyheart's hope faded away as she let out a distressed cry. "My daughter is missing! She's been missing since this morning and I can't find her!"

Burnttail flinched back as dread took over him. *Snakesong is missing? Oh, StarClan, no!*

"ShadowClan, to me!" Smokedream called as he stepped forward. "I'm going to send out a searching patrol to look for Snakesong. We have to find her right away!"

Burnttail rolled his eyes and turned around, irritation replacing the initial dread he felt. "Why? Maybe she's just hunting or taking a walk. Or maybe she's with Sootblossom."

Then, Sootblossom stepped forward from the crowding cats with an alarmed gaze, shaking his head. "She's not with me."

Oh. Burnttail blinked, stunned. Then, Ebonyheart growled and stepped in front of him, her eyes wild. "I know that you two aren't friends anymore, Burnttail, but she's still your Clanmate! You're saying that she's 'just hunting'? What if she was attacked by a dog? Or worse, what if... what if..." She trailed off, her ears flattening.

Burnttail flinched and backed off when he saw the anger in Ebonyheart's eyes, feeling slightly guilty. Then, she turned and looked at Smokedream. "Please, you have to let me lead a patrol. Snakesong is my daughter!"

Smokedream sighed and shook his head. "Ebonyheart, you have to look after your kits."

"But my kits are ready to become apprentices! They're in camp, and they're safe!" Ebonyheart protested. "Snakesong is not, and only StarClan knows where she is!"

Sootblossom sighed and approached her. "Ebonyheart, Smokedream is right, you should stay here and take care of our kits. I'll go instead, okay? And I'll come back with Snakesong. I promise."

Ebonyheart opened her jaws to protest again, but then she sighed and lowered her head. The queen turned around and padded toward her kits, who were sitting anxiously by the nursery.

"Where's Snakesong?" Burnttail heard Cloudkit wail. He turned his head to look at the three kits.

"I'm not sure, Cloudkit, but we'll find her, I promise." Ebonyheart whispered, although her voice sounded shaky and unsure.

"But I want her back now!" Bluekit protested. "I want my sister back!"

Burnttail's heart melted when he heard Bluekit. He sighed. *I promise to bring her home, Bluekit. And maybe after that I can talk with her and we'll become friends again...* He hated how distant the two of them became, even if he tried not to show it or feel it. He'd only realized it now. He clawed the ground anxiously, feeling guilty. *She's fine... right?*

"Sootblossom," Smokedream suddenly meowed. "I want you to take Burnttail, Frostedwillow, and Pigeonswoop to look for Snakesong near the Carrionplace. Pebblewhisper, Needlerose, and Stormfleck, you three will look near the burnt sycamore."

Sootblossom turned and sprinted out of camp. Burnttail forced his paws forward as he rushed after him, followed by Frostedwillow and Pigeonswoop. None of them said anything until they reached the Carrionplace. Burnttail looked at it with disgust. The tall, pale yellow twoleg den was looking somewhat peaceful, although Burnttail could hear rats scurrying near it. He hissed as crowfood scent filled his nose. *Yuck! This place is disgusting!*

"I know, I don't like it either." Pigeonswoop meowed as he flattened his ears. "Rats are disgusting! They actually enjoy eating crowfood, can you believe it?"

"I agree, but we're not here to gossip. We're here to look for Snakesong, so come on!" Frostedwillow hissed, then padded after Sootblossom. Burnttail followed them.

Sootblossom was inspecting the tunnel that went underneath the Thunderpath, when he suddenly froze. He raised his head and sniffed the air. "I think I caught Snakesong's scent. Follow me!"

Sootblossom sprinted into the tunnel, disappearing inside. Burnttail followed immediately, his heart beating rapidly as he hoped they would find her alive. However, he'd barely walked into the tunnel when he realized Sootblossom was standing still and looking ahead. Burnttail looked past Sootblossom's shoulder and froze, his breath catching in his throat.

Snakesong was standing at the other side of the tunnel, looking at them with narrowed eyes. Burnttail's mouth gaped when he realized

that an odd, rogue scent was coming from the she-cat. *What is going on? Where has she been?*

"Snakesong! You're safe!" Sootblossom purred and rushed forward, seemingly to nuzzle her. "We've been so worried! Where have you been?"

Snakesong immediately took a step back, which made Sootblossom freeze before he reached her. "Worried? Yeah, sure." She rolled her eyes and stared at Burnttail. The tom flinched back and lowered his gaze as guilt rushed through him. Then, Snakesong looked back at her father. "Well, don't bother trying to get me to come back. Because I won't."

What? Burnttail snapped his head up to stare at Snakesong with shock. *What does she mean?*

"What do you mean?" Frostedwillow tilted her head. "Of course you're coming back, you're a ShadowClan warrior!"

"Not anymore." Snakesong flicked her tail, her eyes flashing with irritation and... slight guilt? "I'm a rogue now. My name is Snake. I decided to leave ShadowClan this morning, and I'm now living with a few other rogues... *somewhere*."

Burnttail's eyes widened with shock when he heard what Snakesong said. *No!* He ran past the other cats and stopped right in front of the tortoiseshell she-cat, staring into her eyes. "Snakesong! Snake! Whatever, you can't do this! You can't leave us! Your whole family is in ShadowClan, you can't abandon them!"

Snake took a step back and stared at him. The she-cat suddenly looked conflicted as her ears flattened, and Burnttail thought he saw both anger and guilt flash in her pale amber eyes. But then she shook her head and stood taller. "I made my choice, Burnttail. And don't try to come after me. This is *my* choice."

"But-" Burnttail tried protesting.

"Come on, let's just go back." Sootblossom sighed. "It's no use. If Snakesong wants to be a rogue, then so be it." He then turned and

padded away. Frostedwillow and Pigeonswoop hesitated, then followed him.

"What?" Burnttail stood frozen, looking after his Clanmates, then back at Snake. He let out a sigh and blinked slowly at her. "I hope you don't come to regret this. I hope you'll be happy, Snake." He murmured, his voice breaking. He saw her eyes soften slightly before he turned around and followed his Clanmates, holding his head and tail low as regret nagged at his heart. *This is my fault.*

Before he rushed out of the tunnel, he sneaked one last glance behind his shoulder. Snake was staring at him, with one paw raised and an unreadable gaze. She looked as if she was about to say something, but then she shook her head and turned around, disappearing into the bushes from the other side.

His heart dropped. He'd lost her. *I lost her.* He couldn't believe his Clanmates gave up on her so easily. *But so did I, in a way.* He kept his head down as he followed the rest of the patrol silently back to the camp. The walk back was agonizingly quiet, and once they padded back in camp, his fur prickled uncomfortably as he felt everyone's gazes on him.

Ebonyheart was the first to approach him and spoke up with a quiet, hopeful voice. "Did you find her?"

"I- well..." Burnttail trailed off, looking at his paws. He didn't know what to say. What could he say? *I'm sorry,* is what he wanted to say.

Sootblossom padded next to him and hesitated for a few heartbeats before speaking. "Yes, we found her, but... she left us to become a rogue. She doesn't want to come back."

Ebonyheart's eyes widened with shock and disbelief. She shook her head wildly and took a few steps back. "No! No, you're joking! Tell me you're joking! My daughter didn't leave us! She didn't! She couldn't have!"

Burnttail's heart cracked in that moment.

"They're not joking, Ebonyheart." Pigeonswoop murmured as she

joined them, keeping her voice low. "I'm sorry."

"No!" Ebonyheart wailed, then stared at Burnttail. He flinched back when he met her wild eyes. "You! Why didn't you bring her back?!"

"I- I tried!" Burnttail stammered, but his protest was weak. He didn't try. Not really, at least. Not as much as he should have. *This is my fault, and I know it.*

Ebonyheart's ears flattened, but then she shook her head sadly and turned around slowly as she stalked toward the nursery. Sootblossom immediately rushed after her, his tail low.

Burnttail looked after her, his heart beating with grief and guilt, but before he could do anything, Bumblestar's voice rang through the clearing. "Let all cats old enough to lurk in the shadows gather beneath the Shaderock for a Clan meeting!"

Burnttail turned and sighed, padding toward the Shaderock slowly. He sat down heavily, his fur prickling with emotions he couldn't quite recognize or name. Guilt, anger, grief... The other cats were gathering around him, speaking to one another in hushed tones. When everyone was gathered around, Burnttail forced himself to look up at his leader.

Bumblestar's tail twitched. "As you all probably heard, Snakesong left us to become a rogue. I can't understand why she left us, but we have to respect her choice. There is nothing we can do about it now, and we must move on." He hesitated before continuing with a slightly more cheerful voice. "Today, three kits are ready to become apprentices. Bluekit, Cloudkit, and Breezekit, step forward."

Burnttail watched the three kits step forward. They all looked discouraged and they all held their heads low. His voice broke. *I'm so sorry... I should've been able to bring her back.*

Bumblestar sighed. "Bluekit, from this day forward, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Bluepaw. Pigeonswoop will mentor you."

Pigeonswoop stepped forward and touched his nose with

Bluepaw's, then he whispered something to his new apprentice and nudged him gently.

"Cloudkit, from this day forward, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Cloudpaw. Stormfleck will mentor you." Bumblestar continued.

Stormfleck purred and stepped forward, touching his nose with Cloudpaw's. He whispered something, which made Cloudpaw look looked a little happier.

"And Breezekit, from this day forward, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Breezepaw." Bumblestar meowed. "Pebblewhisper will mentor you."

Pebblewhisper stepped forward and touched his nose with Breezepaw's, purring. The apprentice nodded slowly, although Burnttail could see how sad she was. He looked back at his paws, not being able to look as guilt flowed through him.

"Bluepaw! Cloudpaw! Breezepaw!" The Clan chanted. When the apprentices padded back to their places, Bumblestar continued. "I have one more thing to announce. Owlsight will now move to the nursery, as she is expecting Pebblewhisper's kits."

Owlsight purred and padded forward, touching her nose with her mate. Burnttail blinked and looked at them. *I knew it! I knew that they were going to have kits!* He thought, although even the happy news sounded bleak after Snake's departure. It all felt wrong.

"Meeting dismissed." Bumblestar meowed, then he jumped off the Shaderock. The cats began walking off in groups, murmuring and whispering while the new apprentices ran to their mentors.

Burnttail got up and padded toward the fresh-kill pile, then forced himself to look around when he realized he wasn't hungry. He froze as he saw the area near the warriors' den where he and Snake argued when they were apprentices. Memories flashed through his mind as he remembered. He could see the scene again perfectly. Him and Snake arguing, him insulting Bluekit, Snake pinching him with a twig...

Burnttail shook his head and looked away, his legs trembling. His heart broke as he felt hot with shame and guilt. *This is all my fault! It's my fault Snake left ShadowClan! Oh, I should've been a better friend...*

Chapter 15

A few days passed since Snake left ShadowClan and her siblings became apprentices. Burnttail could hardly get himself to go on patrols or get out of the warriors' den lately, always thinking about Snake and whether she was safe or not, and wondering if it was his fault that she left ShadowClan. But he always knew the answer. *It is.*

Burnttail followed Smokedream back to camp, holding his head low. He turned his head and saw the place where he argued with Snake when he was an apprentice, and he saw the scene forming in front of him once again. *Her expression...* He closed his eyes and looked away, lowering his ears with guilt.

Smokedream sighed and turned around. "Burnttail, listen. I know that you're upset Snake left ShadowClan. We all are. But it's her choice, and there's nothing we can do about it. You just have to move on and accept it."

"But... it's my fault she left, isn't it?" Burnttail blinked up at him, his voice coming out softer than he intended. "If only I would've ignored my pride and apologized to her after the argument, maybe she would still be in ShadowClan."

Smokedream's eyes softened, but he shook his head. "No, Burnttail. It was her choice to leave. No cat forced her to. She could've chosen to stay in ShadowClan, but she didn't. You didn't tell her to leave, Burnttail, so it's not your fault."

"I guess." Burnttail murmured, but he still wasn't convinced. He was sure he knew the truth: Snake left because of him. *What other reason could there be?* Nodding slowly to the deputy, he padded toward the warriors' den, still holding his head low. He sat down and looked around the camp, memories flooding his mind once again.

He remembered when he first stepped out of the nursery with Snake and how curious they both were. When they asked

Stormfleck and Prickleshadow, who were still apprentices at the time, a bunch of questions, and when Sootblossom told them more about the other Clans and twolegs. He flinched when he remembered how worried Snake was when he came back in camp with an injured eye from Jaggedriver's attack.

Burnttail closed his eyes tightly. *I can't bear this anymore! I miss her! Everywhere I look, I remember all the memories I had with Snake, and no matter what Smokedream says, I know that it's only my fault that Snake left us. I made ShadowClan lose a warrior because I was so stubborn! I don't think I deserve to be a warrior.*

Suddenly, Burnttail froze, startled by his own thoughts. He opened his eyes and looked around. *I'm not... really happy here, actually. This camp is making me remember all my memories. And it's good memories, but... I spent most of my time here with Snake, and now that she left to be a rogue because of me... is ShadowClan even truly my home anymore? It doesn't feel like it... but I can't just leave, right?*

Right? Burnttail sighed, flattening his ears. *Snake did leave, though... and ShadowClan took me in when I was abandoned by my mother as a kit, but I'm not happy here, not anymore... not after I made ShadowClan lose a cat. That's not what a warrior does. I don't deserve them, but should I really just... leave?*

Burnttail got up and looked toward the leader's den, hesitating. He could either leave ShadowClan, the Clan that took him in, the Clan that didn't feel like home anymore, or he could leave and try to find a new home, if that could be possible. Burnttail looked at his paws, then sighed and padded toward the leader's den. He knew it was probably an impulsive decision and he might regret it, but it felt right now. He didn't know what else to do. He was sure of this. *I'm no use here. All I'm good at is going in ThunderClan's territory and making ShadowClan lose warriors.* He felt like a burden and needed a fresh start. Where? *I don't know. But not in ShadowClan. They deserve better than to have me as a warrior.*

Burnttail hesitated as he stopped in front of the leaders' den. *Is this a good idea?* But as he looked around the camp, the memories began rushing back painfully again, but he quickly pushed them away. And when he saw how busy everyone was, talking the day away

and how unbothered they looked, he knew the answer. *Yes.*
"Bumblestar?"

"Come in!" Bumblestar meowed from inside his den.

Burnttail hesitated for one more heartbeat, then took a deep breath and padded inside, sitting down slowly as he looked at his leader, preparing his speech. He felt awkward. *What do I even say?*

"What is it, Burnttail?" Bumblestar tilted his head. "Is there something you wish to tell me?"

"I... yes, actually." Burnttail nodded, then hesitated again. He took a deep breath. *Here it goes.* "I... wish to leave ShadowClan. I'm sorry."

Bumblestar flinched back, looking visibly disturbed as his eyes widened. "What? Why?"

"I'm just... not happy here." Burnttail forced the words out of his throat. His mouth felt dry. "It's just... all my fault that Snake left! If I would've never gone in ThunderClan's territory, then that argument between us wouldn't have happened... or, if I, at least, talked with Snake afterward and apologized, maybe she-"

"Burnttail." Bumblestar interrupted him gently, shaking his head. "I understand what you're saying, but you need to understand that it's not your fault. Snake decided to leave ShadowClan herself. You didn't force her to, nor anyone else. There was nothing you could've done to stop this. She alone decided to leave."

"Smokedream said the same, but... I'm just not convinced." Burnttail whispered, then looked at Bumblestar. Guilt was clawing at his heart. "I'm sorry, but it's just... ShadowClan doesn't feel like home anymore. I'm very thankful for being taken in, and everyone was very nice to me, but now, after what I've done... I don't think I deserve to be one of your warriors."

Bumblestar opened his jaws again to say something, but then he sighed and shook his head. "I let Snake become a rogue, because that's what she wanted. So, if you want to leave, then I won't force

you to stay. I just wish that I didn't have to lose my two newest warriors in such a short period of time."

"I'm sorry, I really am!" Burnttail cried out. "It's just that-"

"I know." Bumblestar nodded, sounding reluctant. "But are you sure about this, Burnttail? Just know that you won't be able to come back if you leave."

Burnttail hesitated at that. Was he sure of this? But as he remembered everything that happened, the argument, the aftermath, the trips into ThunderClan, Snake leaving, her expression...

He shook his head and sighed softly. He was sure. *I'm sure. This is for the better. I... don't think I can redeem myself after this. Not in ShadowClan. They deserve a better warrior.* "I'm sure." He murmured, trying to sound certain.

Bumblestar nodded, his gaze unreadable, but there was a brief flicker of sorrow in his eyes. "All right. You can go, Burnttail. I understand your choice, and I won't blame you. May StarClan light your path. Do you wish to say goodbye to the Clan first?"

Burnttail tensed. *Say goodbye?* He imagined himself standing in the centre of the camp, saying goodbye to all of his Clanmates and being unable to fully explain why he was leaving. Then he saw his foster parents staring at him sadly, their kits, his mentor...

I can't. His breath caught in his throat. *I can't say goodbye.* He knew he was a coward, but he didn't want to say goodbye. *It will only cause more pain. It's better if I just... walk away.* He thought the Clan would be better off if he simply left without saying goodbye. *They won't fully understand why I'm leaving... and I don't blame them. They'll understand... right?*

"No," Burnttail shook his head, flinching when he saw the disappointment in Bumblestar's eyes. "It's better if I don't."

"All right, then." Bumblestar nodded reluctantly. "It's your decision, but you'd better leave now, then. I will announce this to the Clan

after you leave."

"Thank you." Burnttail meowed and got up, padding outside slowly. His legs were trembling, but he forced himself to walk over to the camp entrance, ignoring the few curious looks from his Clanmates. He stopped right in front of the tunnel and looked past his shoulder around ShadowClan's camp one last time.

His breath caught in his throat at the sight of Sootblossom and Ebonyheart talking outside the nursery, unaware of his decision. Bluepaw, Cloudpaw, and Breezepaw were play-fighting by the apprentices' den while their mentors watched from nearby. Fawnwhisper and Flintdusk were outside their den and placing a few herbs on the ground, talking in hushed tones. Brokenflower and Lightskip, the two elders, were lying on their sides by the entrance to the elders' den, resting and gossiping with one another. Stormfleck and Prickleshadow seemed to be arguing by the fresh-kill pile over who would eat the last squirrel before Needlerose padded over and snapped at them, taking the squirrel for herself as the two warriors looked after her with frustration.

None of them knew that he was leaving for good.

His heart broke. This was probably the last time he looked around ShadowClan's camp. His home. *Former home, now.* His paws felt heavy. *Is this the right decision?* It was too late to take it back now, either way. And he knew the answer. *Yes, it is.*

With a heavy heart, he sighed and turned around, padding outside the ShadowClan's camp for the last ever time.

The late leaf-bare breeze bristled his fur and Burnttail shivered, but he fluffed out his fur and kept walking. He then stopped by the Thunderpath and looked around as a thought suddenly crossed his mind. *Wait... but where am I supposed to go?*

He didn't think about this.

Burnttail blinked, then he sat down and thought about what he could do. *I don't want to become a kittypet, and I don't want to be a rogue, either. What if I accidentally run into Snake? What could I say to*

her? And, either way, I would miss having Clanmates. Maybe I could just... join another Clan start a new life?

I suppose I should. Burnttail sighed. *ThunderClan... no, they wouldn't accept me, and I definitely don't want Jaggedriver as my Clanmate. WindClan... no, I would miss having trees around me, so maybe RiverClan?*

Burnttail contemplated about that for a while until he sighed softly. He didn't know what else to do, and joining RiverClan seemed like it was his only option. *Besides, it can't be that bad... but can I really do that? Change Clans so easily? Will they accept me?* He didn't know, but he had no other choice. *It won't hurt to try, I suppose. And if that doesn't work out...* He tensed. *I... don't want to think about that. I hope everything works out well.*

He got up and shook out his fur, hesitating before rushing over the Thunderpath and trespassing into ThunderClan's territory once again. He hated being back here, but this was really the only way he could think of that led to RiverClan. He remembered the stories that Ebonyheart and Needlerose told him about ThunderClan and RiverClan sharing borders and constantly bickering over some rocks. He found it funny that this could become a problem of his. His fur prickled apprehensively. *They'll either accept me or drive me out. And if they decide to drive me out of their camp, well... I can't blame them. I'm just a toad-brained cat, after all. I'd be wary of myself, too.*

Burnttail looked around ThunderClan's territory, his ears twitching as he remembered the multiple times he'd trespassed as an apprentice out of anger for Jaggedriver. Despite still disliking the warrior, he had other problems now, and he had tried to stop himself from trespassing again. And it worked. His problems distracted him from his hate for ThunderClan, and it even looked silly to him now. But here he was: back in ThunderClan. He clawed the ground anxiously. He wanted to leave as soon as possible.

Over to his right, he saw a river peacefully flowing forward. Unsure where else to go and not wanting to be seen by a patrol, he padded towards it, sighing as he looked into it. *It looks peaceful... just what I need.* He flinched back when he saw his reflexion looking

back at him, his eyes landing on his scars. He shook his head and quickly began padding alongside it, wondering if it would take him to the RiverClan border. He kept following the river for a while, until he heard a snarl from behind him.

"You!"

Fox-dung. He recognized that voice.

Burnttail spun around and rolled his eyes when he saw Jaggedriver rush toward him. He recognized Snowthroat and Weaselfall, who were following him with irritated expressions.

"What do you want this time?" Jaggedriver spat, arching his back. "I won't let you off so easily anymore, flea-pelt."

"Leave me alone." Burnttail hissed. "I'm just passing through."

"You already used that excuse once." Snowthroat growled. "Where exactly are you supposedly going this time?"

"It's none of your business!" Burnttail spat, frustration bubbling inside him. "Just let me go, all right? This is the last time you'll see me, I promise. I won't come back in your territory again."

"Like we believe that!" Jaggedriver growled. "You've already caused enough problems for us. I won't allow you to do that ever again."

But Weaselfall looked convinced. He stepped forward and looked at Burnttail, before looking back at his Clanmates and shrugging. "I say we let him go. He doesn't seem to be lying this time."

"I guess you're right." Snowthroat murmured.

Jaggedriver snapped his head around to stare at them, his tail thrashing. "*What*? This stupid tom has trespassed and messed with us *so* many times, and now you're saying you *want* to let him go without teaching him a lesson?"

"He's just passing through, Jaggedriver." Snowthroat hissed. "If he was lying, he would've already attacked or insulted us by now. Or tried to lie more." She then looked at Burnttail, narrowing her eyes.

"Go. But this is the first and last time we let you go. If we see you here again, we won't hesitate to tear you apart." She warned, showing her fangs briefly.

"Thank you. You won't see me again, I promise." Burnttail sighed in relief, then turned around and continued following the river. He could hear Jaggedriver hissing something to Snowthroat, but he didn't hear nor care.

He continued his walk, then he stopped when he saw smooth boulders emerging from the river that could be used to get to the other side. He hesitated, then pounced on the first one, slipping a little before quickly regaining his balance. Carefully, he pounced on the next one, and he continued until he got on the other side, sighing in relief when he felt the muddy ground under his paws again.

RiverClan scent filled his nose. It carried a strong, fishy smell. Burnttail sneezed, flattening his ears. He didn't like it, but he had to get used to it if he wanted to join RiverClan. *I must be near their camp, but it would probably be better if I waited for a patrol.*

Burnttail sat down patiently and looked around RiverClan's territory. It had fewer trees than he originally thought; it seemed to be mostly a reedy, pebbly plain. If he really focused, he could hear cats talking not too far away, and he realized that their camp had to be close by. *Their territory must not be that large, then. But by the way they look, hunger never really seems to be a problem for them.* He followed the river with his gaze, and by the roaring distant sound that seemed to resemble rushing water, he could tell it came from the gorge. He shivered at the thought. *It sounds terrifying and it's definitely dangerous. I hope I won't have to deal with it too much.* ShadowClan had no access to the gorge, so he had no idea what it looked like or how dangerous it was. But by the sounds of it, it was most likely deadly.

The sound of approaching pawsteps snapped him from his thoughts, and he raised his head. A RiverClan patrol was near. He took a deep breath as he thought about what he could say.

"ShadowClan cat!" The hiss came from a gray tom with black

dapples, who rushed toward him. He was followed by a pale ginger she-cat, who looked at him curiously. "You're Burnttail, aren't you? What do you want?"

Burnttail took a deep breath. *All right, here it goes.* "Yes, and I... I want to speak with your leader. Please. Can you take me to Frecklestar?"

The pale ginger she-cat looked surprised and blinked at her Clanmate. "What? Troutpatch, we can't take him to camp! What if this is an ambush? Maybe ShadowClan wants to attack us!"

Are they always this paranoid? "And why exactly would ShadowClan attack you?" Burnttail tilted his head. "We don't even share a border."

"That's true." Troutpatch nodded, then looked at the pale ginger she-cat. "But then why would a single ShadowClan cat show up and demand to speak to our leader? Berryfeather, go back to camp and tell Frecklestar that a ShadowClan cat wants to talk with her. Burnttail, follow me."

Burnttail nodded and got up, sighing with relief. Berryfeather ran off and disappeared behind some bushes. Troutpatch turned and padded after her. Burnttail followed slowly, looking curiously at the cat who could possibly become his Clanmate. *I can't believe I'm doing this... oh, I hope I made the right choice.*

He looked around RiverClan's territory curiously. They had even fewer trees than he thought by the river, and he blinked in surprise. *I suppose I could get used to that. But I don't like the fish scent that much.* He followed Troutpatch until he saw a well-drained island surrounded by reeds and sedge. He blinked as he noticed a river surrounding the camp, flowing peacefully and undisturbed. *Oh.*

Troutpatch looked at him and tilted his head in confusion. "What? Oh, right, you're ShadowClan." He twitched his ears with amusement. "We have to swim to get to camp. Or I can get Frecklestar to come here, if you don't feel like swimming."

Burnttail shook his head. "It's fine, let's go." He murmured, feeling

determined. *If I'll be accepted in RiverClan, I'll have to get used to swimming anyway. And a lot of it.*

Troutpatch looked taken aback. "A ShadowClan cat who doesn't mind swimming? That's a new one." He muttered. "But luckily for you, the water is very shallow." He said before plunging in the river. Burnttail hesitated, but then he sighed and jumped after him.

The tom was right; the water was surprisingly shallow, but swimming was still needed to get across. He hated feeling the cold water around him, but he struggled to get his paws moving underwater and followed the deputy, the water splashing around him. *It's not that bad, I think. I just need to get used to it.* When he got out of the water, he shook out his fur as water dripped out of his fur, then looked at the RiverClan deputy. The tom nodded at him and padded in the camp, with Burnttail followed him. He looked around.

Cats were sitting by their dens, seemingly already knowing about his approach. They were watching him curiously and warily, with a cream-and-white she-cat ushering her kits into what he assumed was the nursery. He then saw a large rock near the edge of the camp with a shallow stream surrounding it, and on it he recognized Frecklestar, RiverClan's leader. He blinked up at her, growing nervous. He tried to calm his nerves, but they only got worse as he heard whispers all around him.

Frecklestar narrowed her eyes at the approaching ShadowClan tom. "Burnttail, right? Berryfeather informed me about a ShadowClan warrior wanting to talk to me. Come, let's go in my den."

Burnttail hesitated, then nodded and followed Frecklestar across the clearing into her den. The leader's den was by an ancient willow, built of willow stems and woven into its roots. He breathed out in awe as he looked at the willow before following the leader into her den.

Frecklestar sat down in the centre of her den, looking at Burnttail with narrowed eyes. "So, what is it?"

Burnttail looked at his paws, feeling intimidated.. But then, he

sighed and looked up at her. *There's no easy way to say this. Let's hope it goes well.* "I want to join RiverClan, if that's possible."

Frecklestar's ears flattened immediately, her eyes flashing with surprise as she inched slightly backward. "What? Join *us*? And why exactly? Were you exiled from ShadowClan? Because if that's the case, I won't-"

"No! Oh, no!" Burnttail interrupted her, then blinked self-consciously. "I'm sorry. I just... decided to leave ShadowClan myself. It simply didn't feel like my home anymore, and I already told Bumblestar about this. He knows. I just... kept remembering some... things I've done and couldn't look around without being constantly reminded about *everything* anymore, and I feel really guilty about it, and I made them lose a warrior-" He then stopped himself with a snap of his jaws. *I said too much!*

Frecklestar blinked in surprise, then purred in amusement. "Don't worry, I'm not a fox-hearted leader. I won't tell anyone what you just said. But... made them lose a warrior? What do you mean by that?" She asked carefully, looking tense.

"She... left because of me." He murmured slowly, hoping she wouldn't press further.

"I see..." Frecklestar nodded slowly, softening slightly. "And why did you choose RiverClan?"

Burnttail sighed. "Well, I wouldn't want to become a kittypet or a rogue because I'd miss having Clanmates. I've had a few... well... *interactions* with ThunderClan in the past, and they wouldn't welcome me, nor would I feel safe there. And I'd miss trees if I lived in WindClan. So... I chose RiverClan. I could get used to swimming, and I..."' He took a deep breath before continuing. "I just really need a fresh start. I know this is sudden and changing Clans doesn't happen often, but... please, Frecklestar. If... if you want me to leave, I could do that, it's not a problem. But... I'd truly try to learn your ways and become a great RiverClan warrior, if you'll accept me, that is. I'd do my best."

Frecklestar nodded slowly, seeming to consider his words. "Well,

you *did* swim in order to get to our camp... and you weren't exiled, but you *do* seem like a stubborn tom... no offense, by the way. I suppose I can't just turn you away, not after you came here all the way from ShadowClan. You seem determined."

Burnttail's heart lit up with joy and hope at her words.

Frecklestar dipped her head with a quiet purr. "All right. You're welcome in RiverClan, but you can't expect everyone to trust you immediately." She warned. "You have to earn our trust and respect, and I'll keep an eye on you. But for now, you can stay here. Troutpatch, my deputy, will teach you our ways and everything you need to know about us. But for now, come on, I need to announce you to the Clan."

Burnttail nearly jumped out of his fur with joy, but forced himself to stay still. He felt excitement rush through him as if he was a little kit. "Thank you very much, Frecklestar! I won't let you down. I promise. I'll do my best, and I won't make you regret this."

Frecklestar nodded, looking pleased. "I'm glad to hear that. Now come meet your new Clanmates." The she-cat meowed, then got up and padded out of her den. Burnttail turned around and was about to follow her, but stopped, feeling hesitant again. But then he shook his head and padded after her. He made his decision, after all.

I can't believe I actually left ShadowClan... I hope they understand. I just... don't think I deserve to be there anymore, and ShadowClan didn't really feel like my home anymore. I feel terrible for making Snake leave ShadowClan, but... I suppose she made her decision. And so did I. I suppose I'll try my best to make RiverClan proud, and I won't be a burden for them like I was for ShadowClan. They won't regret letting me join... I hope.

Allegiance Update: 3

RiverClan

Leader: **Frecklestar** - Brown-and-cream she-cat with black spots on her face

Deputy: **Troutpatch** - Gray tom with black dapples and green eyes

Medicine cat: **Briarpond** - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Tornfeather** - Black tom with a short tail

Swiftbrook - Gray she-cat with long legs

Berryfeather - Pale ginger she-cat

Bouldershade - Black tom

Whitealder - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Dogspot - Pale brown she-cat with black spots and white paws

Spiderfrost - Black-and-white tom with a reddish belly

Spottedfur - Black she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Burnttail - Dark ginger tom with lighter paws, a brown belly and a gray tail with amber eyes. Formerly of ShadowClan

Queens: **Nettlebrook** - Cream-and-white she-cat. Mother to Whitealder's kits: Acaciakit, a ginger she-kit with a cream belly, paws and tail tip and green eyes, Lavenderkit, a long-furred white she-kit with ginger and black splotches, Sweetkit, a white she-kit

with ginger-brown dapples and blue-green eyes, and Grasskit, a cream tabby tom with green eyes

Elders: **Goosepath** - Gray-and-white speckled tom

Whitewhisker - Pale gray-and-white tom with long whiskers

ThunderClan

Leader: **Snailstar** - Black-and-brown tom

Deputy: **Cloverwhisper** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Medicine cat: **Waspspark** - Tall gray tom with ginger spots

Apprentice, Eaglepaw - Brown tabby tom with white legs and a golden muzzle

Warriors: **Blazesong** - Ginger she-cat with gray stripes and a white belly with green eyes

Petalmist - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Apprentice, Emberpaw - Ginger tom with a white belly and dark amber eyes

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Toadpaw - Black tom with silver patches

Addersnarl - Very dark ginger tom with a black stripe running down his spine

Hazelfoot - Brown tom with a white leg

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Kestrelstrike - Mottled cream tom

Weaselfall - Ginger-and-white tom

Silentpetal - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes

Elders: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Smokedream** - Dark gray tom with pale blue eyes

Medicine cat: **Fawnwhisper** - Cream she-cat with white spots and black paws

Apprentice, Flintdusk - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Oakgaze** - Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Needlerose - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Frostedwillow - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Sootblossom - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Apprentice, Bluepaw - White tom with dark blue-gray dapples and yellow eyes

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Apprentice, Breezepaw - Black she-cat with pale gray spots and ginger ears and paws

Stormfleck - Blue-gray tabby tom

Apprentice, Cloudpaw - Gray-and-white tom

Prickleshadow - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle and black ears

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings. Expecting Pebblewhisper's kits

Elders: **Brokenflower** - Ginger-brown she-cat with white paws and a missing leg

Lightskip - Cream-and-white she-cat

WindClan

Leader: **Fernstar** - Gray tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: **Bearback** - Brown tom with black stripes

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Flowerwing** - Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Violetroar - Purplish-brown she-cat

Plumbreeze - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Apprentice, Robinpaw - Brown-and-white tom with gray speckles

Birchwhistle - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Apprentice, Lightpaw - Pale brown she-cat with a white belly and muzzle

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Maplepaw - Gray-and-brown tabby she-cat

Falconclaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Dawnpath - Ginger she-cat with white spots

Mossripple - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples

Elders: **Bramblefrost** - Pale brown tabby tom with icy-blue eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Snake - Tortoiseshell she-cat with pale amber eyes. Formerly of ShadowClan

Chapter 16

A few moons passed since Burnttail joined RiverClan, and he adapted quite well to his new home. He already learned the basics of swimming and grew used to it, he learned the layout of the territory well, and Frecklestar seemed to trust him and even think of him as one of her trusted warriors. However, a few cats still didn't trust him and somewhat ignored him - mostly the elders - but he was determined to prove them wrong, especially since most of the Clan seemed to like him.

Burnttail followed Troutpatch back in RiverClan's camp. He shook his fur when he got out of the river, then he padded inside and dropped his two minnows in the fresh-kill pile.

Troutpatch padded next to him and nodded approvingly. "I have to say, Burnttail, I'm impressed. Frecklestar didn't quite exactly say why you decided to join us, but I'm glad you did. You've become quite the RiverClan cat, and if I didn't know better, I couldn't even tell you came from ShadowClan."

Burnttail blinked in surprise, then he broke into a purr as pride swelled in his heart. "Thank you, Troutpatch! I'm glad. I don't regret anything."

Troutpatch dipped his head and padded away, most likely to organise more patrols.

Burnttail looked after him and sat down with a sigh as he let himself remember the past few moons. He only went to one Gathering since he joined RiverClan, and it was a little awkward, to say the least. Frecklestar announced his presence in RiverClan and the other Clans immediately grew curious and asked questions, but neither he nor Frecklestar responded to them or said anything else. Bumblestar looked surprised, however - and he didn't mention anything related to him, but Burnttail had caught the emotion that briefly flickered in his eyes during that moment: dismay.

Bumblestar had been upset when he'd heard his warrior joined RiverClan, which made speculations fly around easier, but Burnttail ignored him. He was hurt by Bumblestar's disapproval, but he tried his best not to think about it much. *I'd be upset if I was in his place, too. It makes sense.* He didn't mention Snake, either, which made him feel both relieved and uneasy. He managed to talk with some of his former Clanmates before the Gathering had started, too. Ebonyheart seemed distressed at first, but she accepted his decision at last, mostly being grateful that he was still alive. And so did Sootblossom, and they both wished him luck in his new Clan. Their kits were mostly confused by his decision and didn't quite understand, even asking him if he would come back. His heart broke when he remembered Breezepaw's wide, pleading eyes, and he tried his best to explain to her his decision. *"It's not your fault, please don't worry. I just chose what was better for myself. Become a great warrior alongside with your siblings, okay? I'll be proud of you even if I'm in a different Clan",* he had said to his younger foster sibling.

Stormfleck and Prickleshadow had been surprised, but accepted his decision for the most part. They'd even teased him about having to eat fish and swim for the rest of his life, and even jokingly insulted him. *"But you* will *be a fish-breath from now on! It's not rude if we're preparing you for the insults that will be thrown at you from now on. Oh, and good luck fighting ThunderClan countless of times for a bunch of useless rocks!"* Stormfleck had joked.

But what had hurt most was Needlerose's reaction. His former mentor hadn't even talked or said hi to him, she just stared from a distance. And he didn't miss the flicker of disappointment in her once proud eyes. His heart broke in that moment and it even made him briefly wonder if he made a terrible choice by leaving; but he had pushed that thought away. But even so, the feeling still lingered to this day, and he felt terrible about disappointing his mentor. *Yet it makes sense. If the apprentice I spent moons training left to join another Clan seemingly out of nowhere without even saying goodbye, I'd be upset, too.* But that didn't make it hurt any less. He wished he could apologize to her, but what could he even say? He shook his head with a sigh. *I hope she learns to respect my decision one day.*

He still missed ShadowClan, of course, especially the cats who were closer to him. But he'd learned to focus more on the present. This was his choice, after all, and he didn't regret it. And he was proud to be a RiverClan cat. *And, either way, I don't think I could've recovered from my regret and guilt if I stayed in ShadowClan. Too many memories... I would've gotten lost in the past. This fresh beginning was what I needed, even if it hurt.*

"Burnttail! Burnttail!"

The squealing sound of his name being called snapped him out of his thoughts. He blinked a few times, pushing the memories away as he lowered his gaze. He purred as he saw Nettlebrook's four kits crowding around him, looking up at him. "Burnttail!"

The tom purred and lay down to be closer to their height. "What is it?"

"You used to be a ShadowClan cat, right?" Acaciakit asked, flicking her cream tail tip excitedly. "What was it like over there? Do ShadowClan cats really eat frogs and crowfood?"

Burnttail purred with amusement. "Yes, ShadowClan cats do eat frogs, actually! They're not as bad as some cats think, though. But no, we don't eat crowfood, that's gross. Only rats do."

"Yuck!" Grasskit spat, his fur puffing up. "Frogs sound disgusting!"

"They're more delicious than you think." Burnttail meowed, then tilted his head slightly before speaking. "Although I think I like eating fish more than frogs. They taste better than I thought, even if the other Clans disagree."

"They do!" Sweetkit meowed, jumping up with excitement before sitting down curiously. "But why did you leave ShadowClan?"

Burnttail tensed and hesitated before speaking. "Well, I... that's a pretty personal question, honestly. I'd rather not talk about it." He murmured, hoping the kits wouldn't keep asking. *How can I say I left because I was so stubborn that my best friend left the Clan because of me and I didn't feel at home anymore?*

Lavenderkit looked disappointed, but she didn't say anything. Before anyone else could do or say anything, a hiss came from near the camp entrance.

"Frecklestar!"

Burnttail raised his head and saw Tornfeather and Swiftbrook flanking a silver she-cat. She had a purple collar around her neck and looked a bit anxious, her ears low and avoiding looking at the other cats.

Burnttail tensed up before looking at the four kits. "Get back to your mother now."

"I'm right here." Nettlebrook meowed as she rushed over, then dipped her head to Burnttail. "But thank you for keeping my kits busy. I sometimes can't handle all four of them!"

Burnttail purred and got up, dipping her head to her. "I can imagine. Anytime." He then turned and padded toward the two warriors curiously.

More cats gathered around, and Frecklestar stepped forward, tilting her head. "Who's this?"

"We found this kittypet in our territory." Tornfeather explained, looking at the silver she-cat. "She said she was lost and wanted to hunt a little before trying to find her way home, so we decided to bring her here so you can decide what to do with her."

"I see." Frecklestar murmured as she looked at the kittypet, who cowered under the leader's scrutinizing gaze.

But before she could say anything, Dogspot piped up from where she was standing in the crowd. "I think we should let her eat a little bit of our fresh-kill! She looks friendly!"

Burnttail blinked in surprise and looked at the pale brown she-cat. *What? Is she crazy?* He snorted disapprovingly. "You can't know for sure if she's friendly just by looking at her! Besides, she might not even want to eat our prey. Maybe she's in some sort of rogue group who wants to attack us. You can't allow strangers in our camp like

that!"

Dogspot blinked at him in surprise, then she rolled her eyes and snorted dismissively. "Okay. Whatever you say, weird-tailed ShadowClan tom with trust issues."

"Hey!" Burnttail bared his teeth and growled, the fur along his spine beginning to rise. "I'll show you trust issues!"

Frecklestar raised her tail as she stepped between them quickly. "No, no, Burnttail is right."

Dogspot rolled her eyes in irritation and padded away, followed quickly by Spottedfur, her spotted tail lashing behind her.

Burnttail hissed in annoyance, but backed off and sat down, looking at the kittypet again. *Who does she think she is, anyway?*

The she-cat looked shaken as she took a step back, her ears flattened. Frecklestar sighed and looked at her. "So, what's your name, and how did you come here?"

The kittypet hesitated before speaking, her voice quiet. "My name is Olive, and I just wanted to explore the forest a little, but I got lost. I don't mean any harm, I was just hungry and wanted to try hunting... I'm sorry!" She yelped, then flinched back, as if scared by her own voice.

Frecklestar nodded, her expression softening. "Don't worry, we aren't going to kill you." She meowed, amused, then turned and padded toward the fresh-kill pile. She grabbed a minnow and turned, padding back toward the kittypet and dropping the prey at her paws. "Here, you can have this. We can spare." She then looked around. "Troutpatch and Bouldershade, you two will try and help Olive get back to her nest."

The two warriors nodded, although didn't look too pleased. Olive looked at the minnow and reluctantly sniffed it. She then took a bite out of it and licked her muzzle. She continued eating until she was done, and she raised her head gratefully. "Thank you! It was delicious!"

Frecklestar dipped her head. "Of course. Now come on, go with Troutpatch and Bouldershade and try to remember where you came from." She then turned to look at the two toms. "You two better not attack her, all right? She's done no harm. Just try and help her find her way back to her home, then come back."

Bouldershade nodded and stepped toward the kittypet. Burnttail snorted and padded away, then he lay down near the warriors' den and watched Bouldershade and Troutpatch escort Olive out of the camp. Tornfeather and Swiftbrook padded back inside of the camp and padded towards the fresh-kill pile, while the other cats scattered around and began whispering to one another.

He looked after the kittypet in slight disbelief as she disappeared out of the camp. He couldn't believe Frecklestar allowed her to eat one of their prey so easily. *We should've just escorted her out without a second thought.* But then he softened as he remembered the scared expression on the kittypet's face. He sighed softly. *Or... I guess she didn't do anything wrong, and we have plenty of prey to spare... one minnow won't make us starve, I suppose.*

Suddenly, he heard pawsteps approaching him. Burnttail raised his head and rolled his eyes when he saw Dogspot walk toward him, looking unsure. He hissed. "What do you want?"

"Look." Dogspot sighed and sat down next to him. "I didn't mean to be rude, that was a terrible thing to say. Your tail looks pretty interesting, actually!" She meowed cheerfully, then flicked her tail. "Let's start over again, all right? My name is Dogspot!"

Burnttail blinked in surprise, then purred, amused. *That works.* "Nice to meet you, Dogspot! I'm Burnttail!"

"Nice to meet you too!" Dogspot dipped her head politely, then blinked as her curious gaze went over him. "Woah, you have three scars already? That's so cool, I didn't even notice that before! I don't even have one."

Burnttail pawed the ground anxiously. "Thanks, but it's nothing to brag about, really. I got them by being foolish."

"Really? How?" Dogspot tilted her head, peering down at him curiously.

"I'd... rather not talk about it." Burnttail muttered awkwardly.

Dogspot blinked in surprise, then shrugged. "All right then, if that's what you want." Then got up and purred excitedly. "Come on! I want to introduce you to a good friend of mine! Follow me!"

Burnttail blinked in surprise and got up. "All right." *I already know everyone, but okay.* She looked around, then led him to a tall black-and-white tom with a reddish belly, who was talking with a black she-cat with white spots. They stopped talking when Dogspot and Burnttail approached them and looked at him with a curious gaze.

"Hello, Spiderfrost!" Dogspot meowed. "I wanted to introduce you to Burnttail, my newest friend! Burnttail, he's Spiderfrost, but I think you already know that."

Spiderfrost narrowed his eyes and looked at Burnttail, then shrugged. "Hey, Burnttail. I know we haven't talked that much, sorry about that. I'm not one to trust cats easily. But if Dogspot wanted to introduce me to you, then you must be a nice cat."

Burnttail blinked, then nodded, feeling awkward. "Yeah... thanks?" *They seem a little odd, but... I've seen them around and patrolled with them briefly. They're nice cats, I think.*

Spiderfrost chuckled. "Anyway, I think you know my sister too, Spottedfur." He meowed and gestured at the black she-cat with white spots next to him.

She studied Burnttail with her narrowed blue eyes, then dipped her head, not saying anything.

Burnttail blinked and dipped his head back. He then sat down, unsure what to say. *This is totally not awkward.*

Dogspot sat down next to him and nudged him gently. "Come on, don't be shy! You're not a shy cat. Tell us more about yourself!"

"Hey!" Burnttail hissed, then looked at Spiderfrost and Spottedfur,

still unsure what to say.

Spiderfrost sighed and deciding to break the silence. "So, what do you think about life in RiverClan so far?"

"Oh? Well, it's been pretty great, actually." Burnttail meowed as he thought about the past few moons. "I actually love the taste of fish, it's delicious! And now that leaf-bare is finally over and the weather is getting warmer, I can go for a quick swim in the river and cool off. It's great."

"I'm glad to hear!" Spiderfrost meowed, then tilted his head as he thought. "It's great that you got used to living in RiverClan, but for me, if the roles were reversed? I don't think I could get used to ShadowClan. I'd hate having to eat land prey and living in a pine forest!"

"Me too!" Dogspot agreed, her head shaking with disgust. "I mean, eating frogs? Ew! Gross!"

Spottedfur said nothing, but she nodded slowly.

Burnttail purred in amusement. "ShadowClan isn't that bad, either. And frogs really aren't as bad as other cats say they are."

"It's your opinion, I guess. I'd hate to live in ShadowClan." Spiderfrost shrugged, then blinked, as if surprised by his own words. "Oh, sorry if I sounded rude! I don't really know how to talk to a new cat, but you seem pretty nice. I'll definitely get used to having you around. So don't worry!"

Burnttail blinked, then purred as joy rushed through him. He felt like he belonged, and his previous worries faded away slowly. "It's all right. I'm really glad I got to know you properly. You three seem great!"

Chapter 17

Burnttail followed Spiderfrost, Dogspot, and Spottedfur out of camp, diving in the river that surrounded RiverClan's camp. He quickly swam to the other side easily, then got up and shook out his fur. He raised his head to look at his friends. "Where are we going now?"

"Let's go... this way." Spiderfrost meowed and angled his ears to their left.

Burnttail nodded and padded that way, flicking his tail excitedly. It was the next day, and Troutpatch told them to go hunting and to catch as much prey as they could. Burnttail sniffed the air, then he spun around as he heard a loud, rustling sound. "I hear something in that bush! I'll be back soon."

Spottedfur tilted her head, but shrugged. "All right, then."

Burnttail dropped into a crouch and creeped toward the bush, sniffing the air and concentrating on the noise. *That's a water vole!* He thought as he recognized its scent, unsheathing his claws. Once it scurried away from the bush, he pounced at it and dug his claws in its skin, killing it quickly. He grabbed the prey and turned around, padding back toward his friends.

"Nice catch!" Dogspot meowed, looking approvingly at the water vole. "You've really gotten used to catching RiverClan prey, huh?"

"Oh, come on Dogspot, I've been living here for a few moons!" Burnttail twitched his ears, feeling slightly irritated by her teasing.

"That's true, and I'm glad that you joined us!" Spottedfur purred with an oddly sweet voice.

Burnttail blinked slowly and looked at her, caught off guard by her tone. "Yeah... thanks."

"Anyway, let's continue hunting." Spiderfrost meowed and turned around, padding away.

Burnttail buried the water vole quickly and followed his friend. The tom led them through the territory until they reached the river that marked the border with ThunderClan. Burnttail raised his head and saw the stepping-stones that led to the enemy Clan's territory. On the other side of the river shore rested Sunningrocks, a large granite rock formation with several large rocks stacked on top of each other. He'd heard stories of the amount of times RiverClan and ThunderClan had fought for those rocks, some of the stories even coming from his new Clanmates. They currently belonged to ThunderClan, but Frecklestar had no real interest in trying to take them back. Some of her Clanmates weren't happy, however, and criticised her for the peaceful choice. Burnttail didn't mind it that much; he hadn't quite understood yet why the two Clans wanted control over those rocks so desperately. *ThunderClan can keep them, I don't think there's a problem with it. I think we have plenty of prey already, we won't starve just because we can't use those cursed rocks for hunting.*

Memories of the times when he used to trespass into their territory just to cause trouble suddenly flashed through his mind, and he hissed quietly, but his body tensed up when he remembered Jaggedriver, the older tom who had scarred him when he was an apprentice. He scoffed as he tried to push the memories away. *I still haven't forgiven him, but I've managed to move on, I suppose. It's been many moons since I last saw him, anyway. And I have better things to focus on instead of a toad-brained ThunderClan cat who can't control himself.*

"You all right?" Spiderfrost's concerned voice snapped him from his thoughts.

Burnttail blinked as he looked at the tom, nodding awkwardly. "Oh, right! Sorry, I got lost in my thoughts for a bit."

"Right. Okay, let's continue hunting." Spiderfrost meowed. "There should be lots of prey around here."

Burnttail nodded and padded toward the river, sitting by the edge

without letting his shadow fall over the river. As soon as he saw movement in the river, he raised an unsheathed paw and quickly dipped his paw in the water, slashing the fish that was swimming in front of him. When he felt the fish go limp in his claws, he raised his paw and shook it above the ground, letting the fish fall from his claws with a plop.

"Good job!" Spottedfur meowed, looking at the fish and nodding. "Although you could also try to catch the fish with your jaws. I think it's easier that way."

Burnttail shivered at the thought. Him, putting his jaws underwater? It sounded terrifying. "I'd rather not, thanks."

"Have it your way, then. It doesn't really matter, as long as you catch fish!" Spiderfrost meowed, then looked back at the river.

Spottedfur mumbled something under her breath before walking off a few steps away.

Burnttail looked after her with surprise, then shrugged as he looked back at the river, sighing as he thought about Spottedfur's words. When he saw another movement, he instantly lowered his muzzle underwater, trying not to pull back as the water invaded his nostrils. He parted his jaws and caught the fish, sinking his fangs into it as he quickly raised his head and dropped the fish near his paws. He sneezed and shook his head, feeling a tingling sensation as he struggled to get the water out of his nose. "I don't like this feeling. Not doing that again."

Spottedfur looked at him with wide, surprised eyes. She nodded as she watched the fish fall from his jaws. "Oh. Okay."

Dogspot purred with amusement as she nudged him. "You know, we usually hunt fish like you did just now, but I guess your other option works too."

Burnttail shrugged as he shook out the last few water droplets from his nose. "I like my way better." He looked back at the river, and as soon as he saw another movement, he swiftly plunged his paw in the river and slashed the fish with his claws, then he lowered his

head and parted his jaws to catch it before the river carried it away. He raised his head and dropped it on the ground, hissing as he felt water in his nose again. He shook his head in annoyance. "I think I caught enough." *Never catching fish with my jaws again.*

"So did I!" Spottedfur quickly got up and looked at the minnow and trout she caught. "This should do!"

Burnttail looked at Dogspot and at Spiderfrost. "Are you two done yet?"

"I am now!" Spiderfrost muffled, then dropped the fish he had in his jaws and got up, looking at Dogspot. He purred with amusement when he saw a single minnow at the she-cat's paws. "Come on, you only caught one fish! Really?"

"Shut up, fish-breath!" Dogspot growled and looked at the river. "You scared away all the fish!"

Spiderfrost nudged her playfully and grabbed his prey before walking off.

Burnttail purred and grabbed the three fish that he caught, amused by his friends' interaction, then turned and padded back to camp. He twitched his ears when he heard Dogspot yowl triumphantly. Burnttail huffed in amusement to himself. *She must have caught another fish.*

Burnttail dived in the shallow river and swam back in the camp, barely feeling the cold water due to the warmer weather. He got out and shook his fur, then padded into the camp. He quickly dropped his prey in the fresh-kill pile, then he turned and sprinted back outside, this time trying to jump over the water, but his back legs fell in the river with a sharp, sudden pain once he landed. He growled with frustration and got up, shaking his back legs before walking off. *It is kind of annoying to have to swim back and forth to get in and out of camp, but at least we have a smaller chance of being attacked.*

Burnttail rushed toward the place where he buried his water vole, but he blinked in confusion when he saw that the place had been

digged out already, which meant someone else took it. He looked around, confused.

"You're welcome." Spiderfrost padded toward him, holding the water vole in his jaws with a smug look in his eyes.

Burnttail blinked in surprise, then huffed with playful irritation and nodded as a 'thank you'. The dark ginger tom turned and ran back to camp, followed closely by Spiderfrost. He quickly dived in the river and swam back in camp, shaking his fur. Spiderfrost joined him and dropped the water vole in the fresh-kill pile before turning to look at him. "You know, you're a great hunter, Burnttail! I think you have a chance at becoming deputy one day." He meowed, giving him a slight nudge.

Burnttail blinked, taken aback. "What, me? I doubt it. I wasn't even born here! I'd say that you, Dogspot, and Spottedfur have a higher chance at becoming deputy than I do."

"Yes, but you fit in so perfectly!" Dogspot meowed as she joined them. "But anyway, if you or someone else does indeed become deputy, I hope it doesn't happen too soon. Frecklestar is the best leader out of all the Clans, and Troutpatch is an amazing deputy!"

"I agree." Burnttail nodded, but he suddenly tensed. He felt like he was being watched, his fur prickling uncomfortably. He looked around slowly and saw a cat staring at him through the reeds surrounding the camp. Burnttail stared at the cat, his eyes widening with shock and disbelief. *Snake.*

What is she doing here? Instinctively, Burnttail unsheathed his claws and lashed his tail, staring at his former friend.

Wait, why did I do that? Feeling guilty, he immediately sheathed his claws again. But it was too late. Snake already noticed his reaction. Her eyes widened for a heartbeat, before she bared her fangs and spun around, lashing her tail as she disappeared behind the reeds. His heart dropped with regret.

"Burnttail? Do you know her?" Spottedfur suddenly asked, stepping next to him and looking after the rogue curiously.

Burnttail blinked and looked at her, then after Snake and sighed softly, wishing he could take back his reaction. "I do, actually, she used to be a friend of mine." He meowed, regret nagging at his fur. *Oh, she must think I hate her! Why did I react like that? I'm sorry!*

"What do you mean by 'used to'? What happened?" Dogspot tilted her head as she gazed at him curiously.

Burnttail tensed as he remembered his argument with Snake back in ShadowClan's camp so many moons ago. The harsh words that had been thrown around that day... he lowered his head in shame. "I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine." Spottedfur shrugged, her gaze fixed on the reeds where the rogue had been. "But you didn't seem too happy when you noticed her."

Burnttail's fur spiked up with unease. *Why did you have to notice?* "Yeah, well... I don't know why I reacted like that. It was from instinct, I guess. We used to be good friends once..." He sighed softly, looking away as he remembered how close they used to be. Before everything changed. *Because of me.*

"Hey, don't worry!" Spiderfrost meowed reassuringly as he approached him and blinked at him slowly. "Sometimes you lose friends, sometimes you gain friends. Life is harsh like that, you just need to be stronger than it."

"I guess you're right." Burnttail murmured and looked after Snake, then he shook his head and looked back at the three cats. "But anyway, I'm glad I met you three. You're all great!" He meowed, trying to make his voice sound cheerful despite his thoughts racing elsewhere. *Yet... I can't help it but sometimes miss Snake. We used to be such great friends before it all changed... we were* siblings, *for StarClan's sake! Was a silly argument really enough to cause us to walk on such different paths?*

Chapter 18

"Everyone, wake up! We're under attack!"

The loud shriek jolted Burnttail awake and he quickly lifted his head, still feeling drowsy from sleep. He jumped up to his paws and shook out his fur, then sprinted out of the warriors' den. Despite it still being nighttime and the camp dark with shadows, Burnttail didn't miss the acrid rogue scent, the moving shapes and the angry hisses coming from everywhere at once. He froze, his eyes widening with disbelief. *What in StarClan's name...*

"Them again!" Dogspot growled as she skidded to a halt beside him.

Burnttail looked at her, confused. "What do you mean by 'again'? Is this not the first time that you got attacked by rogues?"

"No!" Dogspot turned her head to look at him, her eyes flickering with hate and unease. "Do you remember when Frecklestar announced at a Gathering that RiverClan got attacked by rogues who killed two of our Clanmates? Those are the same cats!"

Burnttail's fur bristled in surprise, then he turned his head and unsheathed his claws, growling as he looked at the rogues. Determined to protect his new Clan, he quickly pounced on a white tom and pinned him down, raking his claws down the tom's shoulder. The rogue let out a snarl and tried pushing Burnttail off, but he dug his back claws in the ground to steady himself. He bit the rogue's paw and the white tom let out a pained screech. He started struggling wildly, so Burnttail pounced back. The white rogue growled at him and jumped up, but limped away without fighting back.

Burnttail looked after him, bewildered. *He gave up so easily... that makes no sense!*

Then he looked around as a realization dawned upon him. *Wait...*

no warriors died in the last fight... only a medicine cat and an elder... these rogues are only going after the ones that can't defend themselves! Of course, they're not after the cats who can fight back! Those fox-hearts!

Burnttail looked around and ran toward Frecklestar, who was snarling after a running brown tabby cat. "Frecklestar! Wait! This is exactly what the rogues want. Remember the last battle against them! Only Lilacheart and Aspenfeather died, right? A medicine cat and an elder. These cats don't want our territory or prey, they just want to take down the cats that can't defend themselves!"

Frecklestar's eyes widened with realization. "StarClan, you're right!" She looked around wildly, her eyes frantic. "Everyone, guard the nursery, the elders' den and the medicine cats' den!"

Burnttail turned around, but it was too late. A cream she-cat had heard their conversation and rushed into the medicine cats' den. He unsheathed his claws and ran after her. "No you don't!"

He bursted through the moss-draped entrance and pounced on the rogue, pinned her down before she could get to Briarpond. The medicine cat was crouched in a corner, her eyes widened with fear and fur spiked up.

Burnttail snarled and sank his teeth into the rogue's throat. "You fox-heart!" He muffled through the rogue's fur. The rogue started yowling and thrashing desperately under the ginger tom, but he didn't let go, instead sinking his fangs deeper.

"Burnttail, no!" Briarpond's shriek snapped him out of his haze. "Don't kill her! Remember, a true warrior doesn't kill in order to win!"

Burnttail growled in irritation, but let go of the rogue and pounced backward, hissing and licking the blood off of his muzzle. "You're right." Then he stared at the rogue. "What you and your stupid friends are doing is wrong. Why attack cats that can't defend themselves?"

The rogue scrambled up to her paws and looked at Burnttail with

narrowed eyes. "You would never understand, foolish Clan cat." She sneered, although Burnttail could hear her panicked heavy breathing despite her attempt of looking intimidating. "If healers and kits die, then the entire Clan goes, and we can move in easily. There's enough Clans around already, let us have some territory too!"

"Coward!" Burnttail snarled and lunged for the rogue, but the she-cat was quicker. She dodged and Burnttail tripped on his own paws as he desperately tried to stop, but he fell over on his side with a grunt.

The rogue rushed forward and pinned him down and grinned, slashing her claws across the tom's back. "Mouse-brained Clan cat! Think you're so much better than us?"

"One Clan cat has more dignity than all of your group combined." Burnttail growled and used his back legs to kick her off him, rolling away once she lost her balance. The rogue let out a shriek as she tripped over him and fell over with a loud thump. The ginger tom jumped up to his paws immediately and slashed his claws across the rogue's shoulder before backing off with a loud hiss. "Get out while you still can."

The rogue looked up at him and spat, her eyes flickering with hate as she scrambled to her paws and limped away in a hurry.

Movement caught Burnttail's eye. He looked over at the corner of the den and saw Briarpond approach him shakily, her breathing ragged as she looked after the rogue. "Thank you."

"Anytime." Burnttail dipped his head, sighing with relief once he saw the medicine cat was unharmed. He ran back outside and realized, with a start, that the fight was still going and hardly any rogues had retreated. Feeling frustrated, he growled and looked around, determined to stop the battle immediately. *I may be a RiverClan cat now, but ShadowClan's fighting skills could really help us now!*

Burnttail backed off and hid in the shadows by the edge of the camp, thankful for the ancient willow casting a long shadow as he

waited for a rogue to pass by, oblivious to his plan. Suddenly, Dogspot ran past him with a shriek. Burnttail trembled with excitement as he unsheathed his claws, and when a black-and-gray rogue ran by, Burnttail pounced out of the shadows on the rogue, pinning him down proudly. "Surprise!"

While the rogue still recovered from the shock, Burnttail slashed his claws across his side and bit his ear. The rogue snarled and tried fighting back, but Burnttail was too quick for him and he didn't let the tom get up. "Had enough?" He hissed as he slashed his claws across the rogue's belly, and when he shrieked with pain, he jumped backward and stared at him. The rogue got up and snarled, then sprinted away, leaving behind scarlet red droplets of blood.

"Thank you!" Dogspot panted as she rushed at his side, looking at him gratefully. "That was amazing! What technique was that? I've never seen it before!"

Burnttail looked at her, flinching as he felt his wounds sting. "It's a ShadowClan fighting skill, and it seems to be working perfectly. Hide in the shadows and pounce on your opponents when they sprint past you. Use the shadows to your advantage."

Dogspot nodded slowly as she seemed to understand. "All right, I'll try. Thanks!"

Burnttail repeated the fighting skill he learned back when he was an apprentice in ShadowClan a few more times, scaring and injuring rogues in a blur until they retreated. Once the fight started dying down and most rogues had already left, Burnttail limped toward a gray speckled tom that was still facing Frecklestar, his tail thrashing violently.

"This fight is over! You've been defeated. Leave while you still can, you flea-pelt." Frecklestar growled, unsheathing her claws.

Burnttail bared his teeth and stared at the rogue as more cats gathered around the one who seemed to be their leader, their furs fluffed up and bleeding heavily from their injuries.

The rogue looked around, then snarled and locked eyes with

Burnttail, baring his teeth as blood trailed over his left eye. "You! You with your cowardly idea to hide in the shadows..."

"Yeah? What about it?" Burnttail faced him, taking a step forward triumphantly. "Jealous that you were outsmarted by Clan cats?"

The rogue snarled at him, but said nothing. He looked back at Frecklestar, flattening his torn ears. "We'll be back!"

"We'll be waiting." Frecklestar warned, her tone icy cold as the rogue spun around and sprinted out of the camp, immediately being followed by the other remaining rogues. As soon as they dived into the ice cold river, yowls of triumph filled the air. Burnttail let out a victorious yowl, then looked at Frecklestar as exhaustion took over him.

"Burnttail." Frecklestar spoke once the yowls died down, looking at him warmly. "I'm not familiar with your fighting move and I have no idea how you figured out the rogues' motives, but it saved us. Thank you. I'm glad to have you as one of my warriors." She spoke, her voice warm despite the lingering tension in her body from the fight.

Burnttail beamed with pride as he dipped his head, feeling warm with pride at the compliment. "It was nothing, really. All I wanted to do was protect my Clan."

"No, really, you were *amazing*!" Spiderfrost rushed toward him, nearly barreling into him. "You pounced out of *nowhere* on your enemies, and they had no idea! I haven't seen that technique before."

"It's a ShadowClan skill, actually. I thought it would work perfectly to defeat the rogues." Burnttail explained and took a step forward, but winced as sharp pain shot up through his paw. He hissed and lifted it quickly, hissing from the pain. "Sorry, a rogue managed to bite my paw."

Spiderfrost frowned, looking at him with a concerned gaze. "Come on, let's get you to Briarpond then."

Burnttail nodded and limped after the tom. "Thanks."

"Everyone, go have your wounds checked by Briarpond!" Burnttail heard Frecklestar yowl from behind him. He limped in the medicine cats' den and sighed softly, struggling to keep his paw above ground.

The medicine cat was already preparing herbs as she raised her head. "Sit in a nest, I'll come treat your wounds right away."

Burnttail sat down in a nest by the sedge wall and looked at his slightly inflamed paw, then at Spiderfrost, who was standing next to him and watching Briarpond. "Aren't you going to get checked too?"

"No, I'm not that injured." Spiderfrost shook his head as he looked back at him. "Just a few wounds."

"They could get infected." Burnttail warned, feeling concerned by his friend's carelessness. "Briarpond won't kill you, you know. You'll feel better afterward."

"I suppose you're right." Spiderfrost purred with amusement as he sat down in the nest next to him.

After a few more heartbeats, Briarpond padded toward them, carrying a few herbs in her jaw. She set them down and and started treating Burnttail's wounds. "By the way, thanks for saving me. Lilacheart... died this way. Those fox-hearts bursted in our den mid-fight and attacked Lilacheart. I was too shocked to be able to do anything, and Troutpatch was too late to save her..." She flinched, as if she could see the scene playing out in front of her again.

Sympathy stirred in Burnttail's heart as he blinked up at her, wincing slightly from the odd sensation of having herbs on his fur. "I'm sorry about your mentor."

"It's all right." Briarpond murmured. "At least she and Aspenfeather are safe in StarClan. I just wish I could have had more time with her before she left." She sighed, then got up and nodded at him. "You're free to go!"

Burnttail dipped his head as a thank you and padded out of the

medicine cats' den, struggling to get used to feeling the herb poultice stick to his wounds. He shook out his fur slightly, but froze at the sight in front of him.

A gray body was lying in front of the Wetrock. Frecklestar was crouched over it, her eyes closed and ears lowered.

"Troutpatch!" Burnttail's heart skipped a beat as he ran forward, halting next to his leader with widened eyes. "Frecklestar, he can't be... he's not..."

"He's dead." Frecklestar whispered. "A rogue tried getting to the nursery, but Troutpatch held him off and... he got attacked by another one. I tried to get there, but it was too late, they slashed out his throat... Oh, my dear deputy..."

Burnttail looked at the gray deputy, frozen with shock and disbelief. His shoulders slumped. "He was so kind to me when I joined RiverClan and the first one to compliment me for my skills. RiverClan will miss him. He would've made a great leader."

Frecklestar nodded slowly, not looking away from the deputy. After a few more heartbeats, when everyone gathered around, the leader finally got up to her paws. She shakily jumped on the Wetrock and sat down, resting her tail on her paws. "Let all cats old enough to swim the currents gather beneath the Wetrock for a Clan meeting!" The leader yowled with a trembling voice.

Burnttail backed off a few steps and sat down, looking at the leader. The other cats gathered around quickly, murmuring to one another and gasping when they saw the deputy's body.

"We have won this battle, but we lost Troutpatch." Frecklestar murmured, her body still shaking. "He died honorably, defending the nursery from those tyrants. We will miss him."

All the cats fell silent. Frecklestar nodded slowly before continuing, her eyes sweeping across the gathered cat. "But I want to give special thanks to Burnttail. He was the one who figured out the rogues' true motives. They wanted to get rid of the defenseless cats, more importantly our kits and medicine cat, so we would be left

without a healer and young ones to take our places. If it wasn't for him, then more lives would've been lost tonight."

'Burnttail! Burnttail!" The RiverClan cats chanted.

Burnttail looked around, feeling shocked, but broke into a purr as his name was chanted out into the night sky. His heart swelled with pride. *I feel at home.*

Dogspot joined the chanting immediately, her tail flicking excitedly. Spottedfur was watching him and nodded politely.

"We're glad to be your friends, Burnttail." Spiderfrost purred as he nudged him playfully.

Burnttail purred, feeling overwhelmed with emotions. He felt wanted. *I am home.*

"Which is exactly why I want him to be RiverClan's new deputy." Frecklestar voice cut through the chants, looking at the tom. "He has only been here for a couple moons, but he has adapted well, and done a lot for us, even going on extra patrols. He's proved his loyalty to us over and over again, and I can safely say that this battle has been won thanks to him. He's a valued Clanmate, and I hope that each one of you agrees with me. Burnttail, you are one of my best warriors. Do you accept this proposition?"

What? Burnttail froze with shock, looking at his leader in disbelief. *Me, deputy?* But Frecklestar's gaze didn't waver. She looked at him patiently as she waited for his answer. And in that moment, he felt more certain than ever. He purred, overjoyed with pride. His heart was beating faster with excitement. "Thank you, Frecklestar. I accept."

"Then may StarClan hear and approve of my choice. Burnttail is RiverClan's new deputy!" Frecklestar yowled, her gaze warm and relieved.

"A ShadowClan warrior? Our deputy?" A gruff voice cut through the exciting moment. Burnttail rolled his eyes as he recognized Goosepath's frustrated voice. "Frecklestar, have you gone mad?

What will the other Clans think?"

One or two cats murmured their agreements, but Frecklestar lifted her tail to silence them. "The other Clans shall stay out of our business. It's not their place to order us around and tell us what we do and what we can't do." She hissed, her eyes sharp. "Burnttail has proven himself as a loyal and capable cat, and he has done nothing to make us wary of him. Do you have a problem with my decision, Goosepath? Come up here, then, and say it directly to my face."

The Clan fell silent as they all waited for the elder's comment. But Goosepath said nothing. He looked at Frecklestar, then looked over at Burnttail before shaking his head disapprovingly and walking off to join his denmate, Whitewhisker, who cuffed his ear with a quiet warning.

Burnttail looked after the elder in disbelief, but he sighed as he looked back at Frecklestar. He wished the elder would accept him, but he understood his doubt over the leader's decision. *That's okay, I'll prove to him that I can be a great deputy, even if I wasn't born here.*

"Old cats, am I right?" Dogspot broke the silence with a huff before nudging Burnttail forward with a purr. "Well, come on then! Go to your new spot!"

Burnttail huffed with amusement as he got up to his paws, feeling unsure as he padded next to the Wetrock and sat down, looking around the camp. The entire Clan was watching him and murmuring to one another, but none of them looked like they wanted to argue with Frecklestar. Dogspot was watching him excitedly, Spiderfrost nodded proudly, and Spottedfur was watching him with narrowed eyes, her expression unreadable.

But Burnttail paid no mind to her, his thoughts focusing on something else. So many cats had sat in this same spot before, prepared to represent RiverClan. *Am I truly ready? What will ShadowClan think? Is this a good idea?*

But this was Frecklestar's decision, not his. If she thought he was prepared for this, then so be it. He took a deep breath as he lifted his gaze and looked around the gathered cats, hoping he could

make them proud. "Troutpatch was a kind and good deputy. He was very welcoming to me when I joined and considered me as one of his cats. I know that I won't be as good as him, but I promise to try my best. I won't let you down."

Murmurs of approval echoed from the gathered cats, which made Burnttail's heart burst with happiness. *I won't disappoint you, RiverClan. Thank you for giving me this chance to prove myself more.*

Frecklestar purred appreciatively and dipped her head to him, then looked back at the gathered cats. "We will soon sit vigil for Troutpatch, but before we do that, I have one more thing to announce. Nettlebrook's kits are ready to be apprenticed, and at what better time than now? Acaciakit, Lavenderkit, Sweetkit, and Grasskit, step forward!"

Burnttail watched in amusement as the four kits stepped forward with wide, surprised eyes before immediately whispering excitedly to one another.

Nettlebrook's ears flattened as she rushed forward immediately. "What? No, wait, Frecklestar, I wasn't told about this! Oh, their furs are a mess!" She meowed and crouched down to start licking them. Whitealder quickly followed her to help her. The kits began squirming and meowing, trying to get away.

"This is embarrassing!" Lavenderkit complained. "The whole Clan is watching!"

"The whole Clan can wait." Whitealder huffed at his daughter.

Burnttail watched them with amusement as his Clanmates purred joyfully. When the kits' parents backed off, Frecklestar continued with an amused flick of her ear. "Acaciakit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Acaciapaw. Your mentor will be Burnttail, our newest deputy who deserved an apprentice long ago."

Me? Burnttail's mouth gaped in shock. He felt as if he didn't deserve this, but he purred and stepped forward to touch noses with his new apprentice. *I hope I'm ready for this.*

Acaciapaw stared at him, her green eyes wide with awe, but she jumped up to touch noses with him. Burnttail purred as he backed off to sit in his new spot again, with his new apprentice immediately following him and sitting next to him, her tail twitching excitedly.

"Lavenderkit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Lavenderpaw." Frecklestar continued. "Berryfeather will mentor you."

Berryfeather's eyes widened with surprise, but she purred and stepped forward, touching her nose with Lavenderpaw's. The apprentice's whiskers twitched with delight.

"Sweetkit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Lavenderpaw." Frecklestar meowed. "Tornfeather will mentor you."

Tornfeather stepped forward and dipped his head, touching his nose with Sweetpaw's before casting a wary glance at Burnttail. The dark ginger tom frowned as he gazed back at him.

"And Grasskit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Grasspaw." Frecklestar meowed. "Swiftbrook will mentor you."

Swiftbrook stepped forward, surprised, but touched her nose with Grasspaw's before rushing to join Tornfeather.

"Acaciapaw! Lavenderpaw! Sweetpaw! Grasspaw!" The Clan chanted as the apprentices seemed to nearly jump out of their furs with joy.

Frecklestar dipped her head. "We will now sit vigil for Troutpatch. Meeting dismissed."

As soon as the leader spoke, Acaciapaw nudged him and looked up at him with wide, curious eyes. "Burnttail, Burnttail! What are we going to do now?"

Burnttail purred in amusement as he looked at his new apprentice, but he blinked slowly as exhaustion took over him completely. "Nothing yet, it's too dark to go out now. Go rest in the apprentices'

den for the rest of the night, and we'll go out first thing tomorrow morning."

"Oh... all right!" Acaciapaw nodded. Disappointment flickered through her eyes briefly, but it faded away as soon as it came, the apprentice rushing to join her siblings by the apprentices' den.

Burnttail purred with delight, but before he could do anything, his friends immediately rushed up to him.

"Congratulations! You deserve to be deputy!" Dogspot purred.

"See? I told you that you would become deputy one day! Congratulations!" Spiderfrost nudged him playfully. "You'll be great."

"Yes... congratulations." Spottedfur nodded as she stared at Burnttail, nuzzling him briefly before yanking away. "You fought well."

"Yes, congratulations!" Spottedfur dipped her head and nuzzled Burnttail. "You fought well, and you deserve this!"

Burnttail blinked, overwhelmed from all the praise. He took a step back and purred, looking at his friends happily. He didn't even know what to say. What could he say? What does a new deputy say? "Thank you, really! Now, I... I want to sit vigil with Troutpatch." He murmured, his voice trailing off with a sigh. "He shouldn't have died today. Not like this."

Dogspot lowered her head. "We know, but he died a true warrior's death. He defended his Clan and saved the kits. He's been with us for a long time, before I was born even, but StarClan will welcome him." She spoke sorrowfully, her voice quiet.

"He should've lived longer." Spottedfur murmured, her ears flat.

"I know." Burnttail nodded with a soft sigh, then he padded toward Troutpatch's body. Frecklestar was already sitting there, along with Goosepath, Whitewhisker, Tornfeather, and Whitealder, their ears bowed in respect. He sat down next to Frecklestar and dipped his head to her before burying his nose in the deputy's fur, wincing

when he felt how cold it had already become. Troutpatch was no longer here; he had already left to join StarClan. He shut his eyes tight. *Thank you for everything, Troutpatch. We won't forget you. You were a great deputy, and I'll do my best to follow in your paw steps.*

Allegiance Update: 4

RiverClan

Leader: **Frecklestar** - Brown-and-cream she-cat with black spots on her face

Deputy: **Burnttail** - Dark ginger tom with lighter paws, a brown belly and a gray tail with amber eyes. Formerly of ShadowClan

Apprentice, Acaciapaw - Ginger she-cat with a cream belly, paws and tail tip and green eyes

Medicine cat: **Briarpond** - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Tornfeather** - Black tom with a short tail

Apprentice, Sweetpaw - White she-cat with ginger-brown dapples and blue-green eyes

Swiftbrook - Gray she-cat with long legs

Apprentice, Grasspaw - Cream tabby tom with green eyes

Berryfeather - Pale ginger she-cat

Apprentice, Lavenderpaw - Long-furred white she-cat with ginger and black splotches

Bouldershade - Black tom

Whitealder - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Dogspot - Pale brown she-cat with black spots and white paws

Spiderfrost - Black-and-white tom with a reddish belly

Spottedfur - Black she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Nettlebrook - Cream-and-white she-cat

Elders: **Goosepath** - Gray-and-white speckled tom

Whitewhisker - Pale gray-and-white tom with long whiskers

ThunderClan

Leader: **Snailstar** - Black-and-brown tom

Deputy: **Cloverwhisper** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Medicine cat: **Waspspark** - Tall gray tom with ginger spots

Apprentice, Eaglepaw - Brown tabby tom with white legs and a golden muzzle

Warriors: **Blazesong** - Ginger she-cat with gray stripes and a white belly with green eyes

Petalmist - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

Addersnarl - Very dark ginger tom with a black stripe running down his spine

Hazelfoot - Brown tom with a white leg

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Kestrelstrike - Mottled cream tom

Weaselfall - Ginger-and-white tom

Silentpetal - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes

Emberglare - Ginger tom with a white belly and dark amber eyes

Toadshade - Black tom with silver patches

Elders: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Smokedream** - Dark gray tom with pale blue eyes

Medicine cat: **Fawnwhisper** - Cream she-cat with white spots and black paws

Apprentice, Flintdusk - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Oakgaze** - Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Needlerose - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Frostedwillow - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Sootblossom - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Apprentice, Bluepaw - White tom with dark blue-gray dapples and yellow eyes

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Apprentice, Breezepaw - Black she-cat with pale gray spots and ginger ears and paws

Stormfleck - Blue-gray tabby tom

Apprentice, Cloudpaw - Gray-and-white tom

Prickleshadow - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle

and black ears

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings. Mother to Pebblewhisper's kits: Stonekit, a pale gray tom with darker markings, and Wrenkit, a brown she-kit with cream dapples and green eyes

Elders: **Brokenflower** - Ginger-brown she-cat with white paws and a missing leg

Lightskip - Cream-and-white she-cat

WindClan

Leader: **Fernstar** - Gray tom with yellow eyes

Deputy: **Bearback** - Brown tom with black stripes

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Flowerwing** - Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Violetroar - Purplish-brown she-cat

Plumbreeze - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Apprentice, Robinpaw - Brown-and-white tom with gray speckles

Birchwhistle - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Apprentice, Lightpaw - Pale brown she-cat with a white belly and muzzle

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Apprentice, Maplepaw - Gray-and-brown tabby she-cat

Falconclaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Dawnpath - Ginger she-cat with white spots

Mossripple - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples

Elders: **Bramblefrost** - Pale brown tabby tom with icy-blue eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Snake - Tortoiseshell she-cat with pale amber eyes. Formerly of ShadowClan

Chapter 19

Four moons passed since Burnttail became deputy. Leaf-fall has arrived, but thankfully there was still plenty of prey for RiverClan to eat. The new deputy had eased into his new role easier than he expected, and even his most skeptical Clanmates had begun warming up to him; except Goosepath. The gray-and-white elder paid him little attention, and he would always complain and mumble about him whenever Burnttail walked past him. But he learned to ignore the elder for the most part. He felt terrible about having to ignore him, but what else could he do? *You can't please everyone, I suppose. Goosepath will just have to get used to it eventually. This was unexpected for me, too.*

Burnttail got out of the river and shook out his fur, padding back in camp as he was followed closely by Acaciapaw. The apprentice held her tail high proudly, twitching her cream tail tip excitedly as she carried three minnows by their fins. Burnttail turned around to look at his apprentice and nodded approvingly. "You did well today, Acaciapaw. Go ahead and drop your prey in the fresh-kill pile, then get plenty of rest. I want to test your fighting skills tomorrow."

Acaciapaw nodded and padded towards the fresh-kill pile, dropping her prey quickly before rushing to join her siblings, who were chattering excitedly by the apprentices' den.

Burnttail looked after her, then sighed softly as he thought about her training. She'd been his apprentice for some time now, and he hoped he was teaching her well. He always did his best, and even taught her some ShadowClan battle moves he still remembered. *Can't hurt to be a little more prepared.* But even so, being both deputy and mentor at the same time was exhausting, and Burnttail couldn't help but long for the days when he was a simple warrior at times, even if he was proud to have been appointed as deputy. He sighed softly. "Being a mentor sure is tiring."

"You don't say?" Dogspot teasing voice snapped him out of his thoughts as she approached him. "Don't worry too much. You've

been a great mentor so far, Burnttail."

"That's true." Spiderfrost nodded as he joined them. "By the way, you sent out the dawn patrols before you left to train Acaciapaw, right?"

"Yes, I did!" Burnttail nodded, then tensed. His job wasn't done yet. *More patrols!* "Oh StarClan, they probably already returned! I need to send another patrols out again!"

Spottedfur nodded and flicked her white spotted tail, blinking slowly at him. "Well, off you go, then."

Burnttail was about to walk off, but he stopped when an idea flashed through his mind. "Actually, why don't the four of us go patrol the WindClan border?" He suggested. "Is that all right?" *I wouldn't mind spending some more time with them. Being a deputy has kept me busier than I expected.*

"Sure! I was actually looking for an excuse to leave camp, anyway." Dogspot agreed as she stretched out her legs.

"Great! I'll be back." Burnttail nodded and looked around, then rushed toward Tornfeather. RiverClan's oldest warrior was grooming himself near the warriors' den. "Tornfeather!"

The black tom raised his head, his ears twitching. "Oh, Burnttail. Is something wrong?"

Burnttail shook his head. "No. I want you to lead a hunting patrol, actually. Take..." He stopped, then looked around the camp. Most cats seemed busy, except for a particular two, who were talking by the warriors' den. "Take Bouldershade and Whitealder with you."

Tornfeather nodded, then got up and padded toward the other two warriors. Burnttail turned around and ran back to his friends. "All right, let's go then."

Spottedfur nodded, then turned around and led them out of camp. Burnttail followed her and dived in the river, swimming across quickly before jumping out and shaking out his fur. He sniffed the air before heading toward the gorge, followed closely by his friends.

He frowned as he heard the distant roar of rushing water ahead. His fur prickled uncomfortably; he didn't like going near the gorge. *But as the Clan deputy, I need to be fearless. I can't be scared by water. I'll stay away from danger.*

Suddenly, a long, sharp hiss reached Burnttail's ears as they were about to pass by the hunting grounds. He froze and raised his tail to signal for his friends to stop. "What is that?"

"Is that a snake?" Spottedfur tilted her head as she took a step forward.

"A snake?" Spiderfrost scoffed as he shook his head at his sister. "That's impossible. RiverClan has no-"

As soon as he said that, a long, dark and thin shadow emerged from some nearby bushes, letting out another hiss before it slithered away. Burnttail flinched backward, his mouth gaping from shock as his fur bristled. *A snake!*

"No way..." Dogspot breathed out from somewhere behind him.

The snake stopped suddenly, rearing up as it stared back at them. It had a long, black scaly body with a red underbelly. It hissed at them one more time, showing one of its fangs before falling back on the ground and slithering away, a single white spot on its back rippling as it moved.

Burnttail stared after it in shock as it disappeared in the grass, then looked back at his friends in disbelief. "I didn't know RiverClan had snakes."

"Me neither..." Spiderfrost shook his head, flattening his ears. "We should warn Frecklestar when we go back. Should we keep heading for the border?"

Burnttail hesitated as he looked after the snake, but it had disappeared. There was no point in going back, he thought. "Yeah, let's keep going, but be careful of where you put your paws. We'll report this once we go back."

"Odd." Spottedfur muttered, looking oddly shaken as she took the

lead. "Whatever. Let's keep going."

Burnttail shook his head as he followed her, struggling to calm his nerves. He briefly wondered if ThunderClan had something to do with the snake's appearance, since he'd heard of a place in their territory filled with adders, but he pushed the thought away. *That's toad-brained. I didn't catch any ThunderClan scent, and how would they get a live snake in our territory unnoticed, anyway?*

Spiderfrost and Dogspot walked closer to him now, more tense and aware of their surroundings. The roar of rushing water was louder now, and Burnttail could make out the Twoleg bridge in the distance. But before they arrived...

A sharp, high-pitched bark stopped them in their tracks. Burnttail tensed, the fur along his back spiking up as he spun around, but relaxed when he saw no sign of a dog anywhere, nor caught any scent of it. But the dog's bark was louder than the gorge, and it was coming from somewhere in front of them.

"Is everything supposed to go wrong today?" Dogspot muttered as she took a step forward, flicking her black tail. She sounded tense.

"Apparently." Burnttail nodded. "Should we investigate?"

"There's no reason to." Spottedfur shrugged, her voice barely louder than the bark. "It sounds like it's coming from ThunderClan territory. It's their problem."

"Nonsense." Spiderfrost hissed. "What if it's on our side of the shore? We should at least make sure it's nowhere near our camp."

Spottedfur stared at him. "But-"

"Spiderfrost is right." Burnttail interrupted them as he gazed forward, unease creeping up in his belly. He didn't like this. "The bark is too loud for us to tell where exactly it is. Let's make sure it's not on our territory." Without waiting for a response, he padded forward carefully. He rolled his eyes when he heard an exasperated sigh coming from behind him.

Burnttail picked his way through the grass carefully toward the

river, flattening his ears as the barking got louder. He was on edge now, sneaking glances all around to make sure the dog didn't jump at them from behind the bushes. But nothing happened; it was just the four of them, heading toward an odd, unknown barking that started out of nowhere.

They passed by the camp quickly, and as he prepared to go down the short slope that led to the river, an odd scent filled his nostrils. At the same time, he realized that the desperate barking had abruptly stopped, and normally he would've questioned it, but his attention was focused on the odor ahead of him. He froze as he recognized the acrid scent. "Rogue!"

"Is that cursed rogue group back?" Spiderfrost hissed from next to him.

"I doubt it. I'm only catching the scent of one cat." Burnttail shook his head, but tensed when he saw something ahead. A cat was lying oddly still by the riverbank with their head greatly lowered, and he assumed the trespasser was drinking water. He frowned as he noticed the odd position the cat was in. *That's not natural.*

He was about to approach the cat, but before he could, a black blur flashed at the edge of his vision. He flinched backward and immediately looked down, but sighed in exasperation when he realized it was just a spider. The tiny insect with dangling legs appeared out of nowhere, crawling rapidly on the sandy shore toward a patch of sedge a couple of paw steps away. Burnttail hissed from disgust as he watched the spider work its way into the sedge, its tiny white head being the last thing he saw before it disappeared. *Gross.*

"Didn't know I'd watch a spider crawl into sedge today. How entertaining." Dogspot joked.

Burnttail nodded before he turned his head. There was something more important to focus on: the odd cat by the riverbank. It was still there and hadn't moved an inch. Confused, he catiously approached the cat. "Hello?" He whispered softly.

No answer.

Is this cat...? Burnttail lifted one of his light ginger paws and placed it on the cat's shoulder, but he tensed when he thought he recognized the cat. Tortoiseshell. Long, dappled tail.

No.

His stomach twisted. He slowly moved the cat with his paw until he got them away by the river, slowly turning until he could see the cat's face.

He recognized the cat immediately. His heart skipped a beat.

"No!" He choked out.

The cat was soaking wet, water dripping out of her fur. This happened recently.

"Snake!" Burnttail shrieked as he collapsed by his former friend's body, nudging it with his paws desperately, checking for any signs that she was alive. "Please! No, this can't be true! Wake up please... say something..."

He was aware of Spottedfur rushing forward and halting next to him. The she-cat looked down and froze when she saw the rogue's body, with her tail puffing up.

Dogspot was hanging back awkwardly, but Spiderfrost approached Burnttail and crouched next to him. He put his face next to the rogue's chest, and after a few heartbeats he sighed and shook his head. "She's dead."

"No!" Burnttail shrieked out as dread filled him, burying his fur in Snake's once-warm fur. "No, no, no... this can't be happening, it can't be!"

"Burnttail? Do you know her?" Dogspot asked as she approached him, her voice soft with worry. She crouched next to him and lay her tail on his back comfortingly, but Burnttail barely felt it.

He nodded slowly, unable to look away from Snake's body. "Yes, she... she was an old friend. Her name is Snake, she was the rogue who was watching..." His voice trailed off, his breathing getting

heavier. He shook his head a few times before burying his nose in Snake's fur again, his body trembling with grief. This wasn't happening. *This isn't real.* "Please, Snake, say something..."

"Maybe... maybe the dog killed her?" Dogspot suggested quietly.

"I doubt it." Spiderfrost shook his head. "I don't see any wounds on her."

Burnttail lifted his head slowly, his gaze blurry as he looked over his former friend. Spiderfrost was right; there was no sign of injury on her. He remembered the barking he'd heard earlier, and how abruptly it ended. The forest was eerily silent now, as if no dog had even barked at all. Did he just imagine it? He shook his head. That didn't matter right now. *Snake is more important, and she's...*

"Who could do this to her? Who killed her?" Burnttail wailed, his heart breaking as he stared at his friend's unmoving body.

Spiderfrost nudged him gently. "I... I don't know. I'm so sorry, Burnttail..."

"She wasn't killed." Spottedfur whispered as she approached Snake's body, peering down at it before speaking quickly. "I think she drowned. Her fur's wet."

Drowned? "No." Burnttail shook his head dismissively. "No, Snake is smarter than that. Someone... I think *someone* drowned her."

His friends were quiet for a few heartbeats. Dogspot then shook her head and leaned on Burnttail slightly. "Burnttail... come on, let's go back to camp. You should rest."

"No!" Burnttail snapped as he pulled back, which made Dogspot flinch backward. He tensed as guilt gnawed at his heart. "Sorry. I just... I want to bury her first. Please... I can't leave her body behind to be eaten by crows. I can't."

Spiderfrost nodded slowly as he got up. "All right. We'll wait for you."

Burnttail hesitated as he got to his paws slowly, still trembling. He

carefully lowered his head and grabbed Snake's scruff, tumbling slightly before regaining his balance quickly. His friend's fur had already grown cold, and it lacked the warmth that once comforted him, back when he was a kit. He padded away, shocked and confused by all of this. It didn't make any sense. Snake was dead. How? *Why? This is just a dream, right? She can't be dead... she* can't*! Not like this... oh, StarClan, this is all my fault, isn't it?*

He kept following the river until it took an abrupt turn to the left. The gorge wasn't far off, but neither was ShadowClan's territory. This was probably the closest place to ShadowClan he could get to. His heart squeezed painfully as he gently lowered Snake's body to the ground and started digging through the sandy ground. *Buried in RiverClan territory, with ThunderClan to her right and WindClan to her left... ShadowClan seems so far away... oh, Snake, I'm so sorry. I wish I could bury you closer to our former home.*

Once he dug out a good sized hole near the shore, he picked up Snake gently and carried her over as gently as he would carry a kit. His heart throbbed as he placed his friend down and let go of her scruff. He raised his head as his heart throbbed uncomfortably. Snake was now resting on her side, tail tucked neatly over her back paws. *Just as if she were sleeping...*

He closed his eyes and unsheathed his claws, digging them into the dirt as he felt the world spin around him. *I can't bear to look... oh, why did it have to come to this? Why did she have to die?*

The sound of approaching paw steps made him open his eyes and look behind his shoulder. Dogspot was approaching him, her ears lowered. "I can bury her, if you want." She murmured, her voice gentle as she looked down at Snake's body.

"No, it's... fine. She was my friend, I need to be the one who buries her." Burnttail murmured as he looked back at his friend. His heart jolted with pain at the sight. He raised a paw to push some dirt back, but he flinched backward once it hit Snake's fur. He wailed. "This isn't fair! Why did she have to die? Why did StarClan take her away so soon?" *Bring her back!* He wanted to yell to the sky. But he knew it was useless. StarClan wouldn't listen to his prayers. There was nothing they, or anyone else, could do now.

"Burnttail..." Dogspot sighed as she leaned against him comfortingly. "Let's go back to camp, you need rest. Spottedfur and Spiderfrost are waiting."

Burnttail didn't say anything. With a heavy heart, he quickly pushed the remaining dirt over Snake's body until it was fully covered, and all that remained was a mound left over. This was Snake's final resting place, in a strange territory and far away from where she used to live as a rogue.

He forced himself to look away as he padded away, holding his head low as he leaned on Dogspot, who supported him and rested her tail over his back as they walked. Neither of them said anything, with Burnttail's eyes focusing on the ground. When they reached the river surrounding the camp, he dived in almost blindly, with little to no energy to swim. Dogspot immediately followed and helped him swim to the other side, doing most of the swimming. He got out slowly and didn't even shake out his fur. Instead, he walked for a few more steps and sat down heavily, staring at his paws.

Spiderfrost approached him slowly and sat down next to him. "Burnttail, listen... I'm sure Snake is in StarClan now, or... or a better place." He murmured, trying to sound reassuring. "She'll be watching over you, I'm sure of it."

"No, she won't!" Burnttail wailed, looking at him. He felt breathless. "I was *such* a horrible friend to her! This is all *my* fault." His mouth ran dry as he remembered their last interaction: Snake had watched him curiously through the reeds that surrounded RiverClan's camp, and how did he react? By unsheathing his claws and snarling. *Aggressively. And then Snake left, and I haven't seen her since.* That was the last time she saw him, and he reacted terribly when he saw her. *I gave off the impression that I didn't want to see her anymore... which was so wrong. It wasn't true.* His breathing grew ragged. Now he could never see her again, or apologize to her. His entire body trembled.

"Don't say that!" Spottedfur exclaimed suddenly as she sat in front of him, wrapping her tail neatly around her white paws. "It's not your fault. You didn't kill her."

"I... guess." Burnttail murmured, but he wasn't convinced.

Dogspot moved closer to him and leaned against him, her eyes warm. "Burnttail, listen. We can all tell Snake meant a lot to you, and this... I know it hurts. You should take a break."

"A break? I can't!" Burnttail protested, his shoulders slumping as he remembered the duties he needed to get back to. "I'm RiverClan's deputy and Acaciapaw's mentor. I can't just neglect my duties! My Clan needs me!" But his voice lacked confidence. Getting back to his duties was the last thing he wanted. Everything seemed to be wearing him down. *All I want is to curl up and sleep.*

"Absolutely not. You barely even had the energy to swim back into camp!" Dogspot protested, then sighed softly. "Look, I'm sure Frecklestar will understand. You need to take at least a few days off. And I can take Acaciapaw out tomorrow for you, so you can rest."

"Would you really do that?" Burnttail looked at Dogspot, surprised.

"Of course! I'm your friend, after all. I can't let you exhaust yourself to death." Dogspot purred reassuringly.

"She's right." Spiderfrost nodded. "Now come on, go rest. I'll tell Frecklestar about this. And tell her about that snake we saw."

Burnttail sighed softly. His friends' desire to help eased his grief a little, but it didn't make it go away entirely. His paws still felt as hard as rocks, but he felt grateful for their help. He was about to struggle to get up, but stopped when he noticed Spottedfur staring right at him, ears angled forward and her fur spiked slightly.

Is she feeling okay? He coughed to clear his throat before speaking. "Uh, Spottedfur? Is everything all right?"

Spottedfur flinched suddenly, as if she had been struck. But she nodded quickly, her fur lying flat immediately. "Oh! Everything is fine, yeah, sorry. I was... waiting to talk to you. Listen, uh... I'm very sorry that Snake died." She spoke, her voice a little tense as she got up. "But you have to be strong for all of us, all right? Go ahead and rest."

Spottedfur blinked, surprised, like she wasn't expecting to be noticed. "Oh! Everything's fine, I was just waiting to talk to you. Listen.. I'm very sorry that Snake died, but.. you have to be strong, for all of us, alright?" She sighed and took a step forward. "Go rest, you deserve it."

Easier said than done. "Thanks." Burnttail said instead, too worn out to argue. He headed for the warriors' den slowly, letting his gray tail drag on the ground behind him. He could barely feel his paws anymore; he numbly walked forward, keeping his head down and averting his eyes. He could feel his Clanmates' curious eyes on him, but he ignored them. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now. *Or anytime soon.*

He walked into the warriors' den with no energy before collapsing into his nest heavily, which was situated in the centre of the den. He shut his eyes tight and buried his nose into his paws. He shuddered, his tail lashing slightly. He was breathing slowly, his fur prickling uncomfortably. Everything felt wrong. His chest felt like it was being squeezed uncomfortably. He hated this feeling. *Snake, I'm so sorry... it's all my fault you died. The other cats can say whatever they want, but I know this is my fault. If I had put my stubborn pride away and apologized to you earlier, then maybe you would've still been alive right now, and we would've both been proud warriors of ShadowClan...*

Chapter 20

Burnttail followed Frecklestar closely toward the Fourtrees, keeping his head held high despite longing for his nest back in the warriors' den. It was a Gathering night and the RiverClan cats were nearing the Twoleg bridge across the gorge, the roar of the rushing water echoing against the steep walls and muffling any other sound. A few days passed since Burnttail had found Snake's body, and despite the tom's attempts at trying to recover, he was still in disbelief and refusing to accept his friend's death.

As the cats crossed the Twoleg bridge in silence and approaching Fourtrees, loud voices of multiple gathered cats could be heard from ahead. Burnttail angled his ears forward; they were close. Frecklestar led them on a rocky path until she stopped once they reached the point that overlooked the large hollow. She raised her tail, signaling for the RiverClan cats to scatter around, and they immediately followed the command. Burnttail padded forward, looking around for his former Clanmates as memories of his first Gathering as deputy flashed through his mind.

That was one awkward night, he remembered with a shake of his fur. Ebonyheart, Sootblossom, and their kits, albeit surprised, congratulated him, while Stormfleck teased him about attacking ShadowClan once he became leader, to which Prickleshadow had responded by nudging him harshly and telling Burnttail not to pay him any mind.

The other deputies didn't seem to care too much; Smokedream had looked surprised, but congratulated him nonetheless. Burnttail felt odd thinking about how he was now considered equal to his former Clan's deputy. His other former Clanmates hadn't been so accepting, however. Most of them ignored him, and he'd even heard shocked gasps coming from them when Frecklestar announced his new position. Needlerose still refused to talk to him, and several ShadowClan cats even looked disappointed, with Bumblestar staring at him disapprovingly. He shook his head to drive away the

memories. *To be entirely honest, I'd be skeptical, too, if I were in their paws. This is very unheard of, a cat from a different Clan becoming another's deputy. But... it's not really their business, is it? And besides, I haven't done anything to prove that I can't be trusted, neither to RiverClan nor ShadowClan.*

He scanned the clearing for a particular cat, and purred when he saw him. Sootblossom was already approaching him, and Burnttail rushed to greet him after a moment's hesitation. He was wondering if he should tell him about Snake's death or not. "Hello, Sootblossom!" He greeted, trying to sound as cheerful as he could.

"Hey, Burnttail!" Sootblossom purred as he stopped in front of him. "How has life in RiverClan been?"

"It's been... all right, I suppose." Burnttail spoke slowly, still hesitating. *Should I just tell him?*

Sootblossom tilted his head before sighing. He saw right through him. "You can't fool me, Burnttail. What happened?"

"Well, I..." Burnttail trailed off, then took a deep breath. *Snake is his daughter. He deserves to know.* He braced himself for the tom's reaction. "I was... patrolling near the river a few days ago, and I... I found Snake's body beside it. She... I think she might've drowned, but... I'm sorry." He spoke softly, wincing as he recalled the moment.

Sootblossom's expression immediately dropped. His eyes widened with shock and he backed off, shaking his head. "No, you're joking... tell me you're joking. My daughter isn't dead."

"I refused to believe it, too." Burnttail said softly, his ears flattening. It hurt to see the tom's reaction. "But... it's true. I buried her as close to ShadowClan's territory as I could."

Sootblossom's breath hitched, his eyes wide with disbelief. His jaw dropped before he shook his head and sighed softly. "I... I see. I'm... sure that Snake died honorably. Maybe she was defending herself from another rogue, and..." He trailed off.

Burnttail nodded slowly before his ears drooped and he stared down at his paws. "Oh, Sootblossom, it's all my fault that Snake died, isn't it?" He wailed.

Sootblossom shook his head immediately and took a step forward. "No, Burnttail, it's not." He spoke quietly and slowly. "We don't know for sure why she left to become a rogue, but you didn't cause her death. If... if someone killed her, then it's that cat's fault, not yours."

"But... if our argument never happened, and if I wasn't stubborn enough to trespass in ThunderClan's territory countless of times, then maybe Snake would've still be in ShadowClan right now... alive and well." Burnttail protested, his heart squeezing with guilt.

Sootblossom shook his head, his tone gentle. "You can't be sure of that, Burnttail. Maybe... maybe she would've left either way. Look, you need to stop blaming yourself. It's not doing any good, and..." He took a deep breath. "It won't bring her back."

It won't bring her back. Burnttail tensed. The words sounded harsh, but the tom was right. He sighed softly. "I suppose you're right." He murmured before immediately trying to change the subject, not bearing to talk about Snake any longer. "By the way, where's Ebonyheart?"

Sootblossom's expression lit up slightly at the change of subject, although Burnttail could see by the flick of his tail tip that he was still shaken. "Oh, she stayed back in camp. Owlsight's kits are five moons old and they like to cause trouble. They've already left camp more times than I can count!" He sighed, exasperated. "Ebonyheart wanted to stay back to help her."

Burnttail purred in amusement, then raised his head to look at the sky. The moon was nearly at its highest spot now, right above the Great Rock. "Kits will always be kits. Anyway, I should go sit with the other deputies now, the Gathering will probably start soon. Goodbye, Sootblossom!"

"Take care!" Sootblossom meowed before turning around and walking off, his body looking tense.

Burnttail sighed softly, then turned around and padded toward the Great Rock. He sat down at the base of it, by the side, and dipped his head to the other deputies. He blinked in surprise when he saw that Bearback and Smokedream were missing. Sitting next to him, there was another WindClan warrior that Burnttail couldn't identify, a black-and-ginger she-cat, and instead of Smokedream sat Frostedwillow.

"Where's Smokedream?" Burnttail asked quietly, almost fearfully.

"Burnttail." Frostedwillow greeted with a cold voice, her eyes flickering with an emotion he couldn't quite place before she looked away suddenly and wrapped her gray tail over her front paws. "You'll find out soon."

Before Burnttail could ask more, Bumblestar yowled from the Great Rock. "Let the Gathering begin!"

Burnttail raised his head and looked at the leaders curiously. Bumblestar dipped his head and got up. "I'll start. Sadly, we lost Smokedream, Fawnwhisper, and Lightskip to greencough. We still mourn their loss, and pray they found their way to StarClan easily." Bumblestar meowed, then he lowered his gaze and fell silent for a few heartbeats

Burnttail's heart dropped at the news and his jaw dropped. *They're... dead? Oh, StarClan, not them too! Could this possibly get any worse?*

The tom sighed and closed his eyes as he thought about the deceased ShadowClan cats. Smokedream, the deputy that was always kind to his cats and was never snappy. Fawnwhisper, the gentle medicine cat that always helped Burnttail with his injuries without a complaint, and Lightskip, the grumpy elder and Brokenflower's best friend, who had been with them for such a long time. His paws seemed to squeeze with grief. *May StarClan welcome them.*

"But ShadowClan must move on, of course, and our new deputy is Frostedwillow." Bumblestar announced as he looked down at his deputy, who dipped her head to him. Burnttail looked back and his

heart twisted when their eyes briefly met; Bumblestar's gaze immediately turned icy before looking away. "Oakgaze, our oldest warrior, has retired to the elders' den. And we also have three new warriors: Bluepatch, Breezesong, and Cloudpath."

Oh! Burnttail immediately forgot of the icy stare as he searched the clearing for his younger adopted siblings. They were sitting by Sootblossom and immediately jumped up to their paws when they were announced. *They've grown so much!* He purred with delight. Despite having joined another Clan, he was still proud of them and would cheer them on from a distance. But then his heart grew heavy as another thought crossed his mind. *Snake should've been here to see them, too.*

As Bumblestar sat back down, Burnttail noticed Bearback, WindClan's deputy, getting up and stepping forward, his muscles rippling beneath his brown pelt. "Unfortunately, we have been attacked by a group of rogues and we have lost Fernstar and Bramblefrost to them, but we luckily managed to drive them away with wounds they won't easily forget. As Fernstar's deputy, I took his place and hope to be as great as he was, and I am now known as Bearstar, WindClan's new leader." He announced, looking over the clearing proudly.

Rogue group? Burnttail blinked with surprise. Could it be the same rogue group that had attacked RiverClan twice? Most likely, and I see they've moved on to a different Clan. *Oh, those cowardly fox-hearts...*

After a few more heartbeats, Bearstar continued. "I have appointed Plumbreeze as my deputy." He nodded toward the black-and-ginger she-cat, who blinked back, shifting in her spot. He looked back at the clearing. "Flowerwing and Violetroar have both retired to the elders' den, and we, too, have three new warriors with us tonight: Robinswoop, Lightcloud, and Mapleheart."

Burnttail searched for the warriors curiously, and he only caught a slight glimpse of the cats, sitting beside their Clanmates at the back of the clearing. Bearstar sat down afterward, and Frecklestar got up after him. "Prey has been running well in RiverClan, and we have been unbothered by the colder weather. We haven't lost any cats in

the past moon, but I grieve the fallen cats from the other Clans." She dipped her head politely to Bumblestar and Bearstar. "May StarClan welcome the fallen. Congratulations, Bearstar."

Bearstar dipped his head back as Frecklestar sat back down. Snailstar got to his paws after them. "Our medicine cat apprentice, Eaglepaw, has received his full name of Eagleflight." He nodded toward the brown tabby tom sitting by the other side of the Great Rock next to his fellow medicine cats. "Blazesong has retired to the elders' den, and we unfortunately lost Addersnarl to the paws of a monster. That is all."

"Then the Gathering is over!" Bumblestar yowled and jumped off the Great Rock, immediately calling for his cats.

Burnttail got up and dipped his head to the other deputies politely, his gaze locking with Frostedwillow's for a few heartbeats longer. "Congratulations." He spoke quickly before he rushed to join Frecklestar when his leader jumped off as well.

"RiverClan, let's go home!" Frecklestar called, raising her head high as she waited for her Clanmates to join her

The RiverClan cats started gathering around Frecklestar, all whispering to one another. Burnttail looked around, making sure everyone was present, then he dipped his head to his leader. "Everyone is here, Frecklestar. We can go back."

The RiverClan leader nodded and turned around, leading her cats back to camp. Burnttail followed her and noticed Spiderfrost rushing to join him, so he slowed his pace. "A lot of cats have died this past moon." He whispered, his eyes narrowed apprehensively. "I don't like this. Something feels off."

"I know." Burnttail nodded with a sigh. He'd felt it too, especially after Snake's death. He shivered. "I told Sootblossom that Snake died. He's her father, you know. I... I didn't think it was right to keep the truth from him."

Spiderfrost blinked, then nodded slowly. "I think you did a good thing. It's better that he knows the truth, even if it hurts."

Burnttail nodded and sighed heavily. "Definitely. Also, I can't wait to get back to camp. I'm tired." He yawned.

Spiderfrost looked at him and sighed with relief. "You're feeling a little better now, aren't you? I'm glad."

"I'm trying to. I can't forget Snake, and I don't want to, but I am trying to move forward." Burnttail spoke softly. His heart still hurt whenever he thought of Snake, but he tried his best not to focus on it too much. As RiverClan's deputy, he had responsibilities and duties he needed to take care of, even if it hurt. "By the way, thank you for taking Acaciapaw out for training today. Spottedfur was meant to take over tomorrow, right?" When his friend nodded, he continued. "I'll tell her that she doesn't have to anymore. I'll get back to training her. She is my apprentice, after all."

"If you're sure." Spiderfrost dipped his head to the dark ginger tom.

When the cats arrived back in camp, Burnttail padded toward the warriors' den alongside his friend, trying his best not to let himself think about Snake or the deaths he'd heard at the gathering. Pushing the thoughts out of his mind as best as he could, he curled up in his nest and sighed softly as he rested his head on his paws. He let his gaze wander over his sleeping Clanmates for a few heartbeats before closing his eyes and falling into a deep sleep.

Chapter 21

A few weeks passed since Snake's death. Burnttail was slowly starting to find himself again, but still blamed himself for her death and tried not to think too much about it anymore.

Burnttail swam out of the river and shook his fur, followed closely by Acaciapaw, who wasn't far from becoming a warrior. The she-cat looked up at him and purred, her eyes glinting mischievously. "I was stronger than you today, wasn't I? I beat you during our mock battle!"

Burnttail nodded, his heart swelling with pride. "That's true, but you still have to work a little more on some of the ShadowClan battle skills. When you're hiding in the shadows, try to hold your breath when a cat walks past you, so they can't hear you and you can use the element of surprise. We'll practice this again tomorrow, but you're free for the rest of the day."

Acaciapaw purred, her green eyes bright with joy. "Thanks, Burnttail!" She meowed, then turned and sprinted toward her siblings, who were sitting by the fresh-kill pile. Burnttail looked after her proudly.

Lavenderpaw raised her head and greeted her sister with an excited nod. "Welcome back, Acaciapaw! By the way, look, I got a flower!" She purred and turned her head sideways to show a lilac plant wrapped neatly around her left ear, its gray-green leaves draping over her head gently.

Acaciapaw's mouth gaped. "No way! Where did you get it from?"

Grasspaw rolled his eyes and scoffed. "She randomly found that lavender while hunting today and put it behind her ear. Seriously, Lavenderpaw, it's just a flower, nothing more!"

"Yes, but I'm *named* after it!" Lavenderpaw flicked her tail excitedly. "I got a flower! I got a flower!"

Burnttail purred in amusement as he watched the apprentices, but turned his head when he heard paw steps approach him; his friends were rushing to greet him.

"Lavenderpaw is very happy about her flower. She trotted in camp not long before you and shrieked *'I got a flower! I got a flower!'* for the entire Clan to hear. I really don't get it." Spiderfrost sighed and looked at the apprentices.

Spottedfur shrugged, looking at Lavenderpaw as she flicked her tail. "She must really like flowers, I guess."

"Don't doubt it!" Dogspot's whiskers twitched with amusement. "Berryfeather looked really annoyed, but she didn't say anything. There's no harm in having accessories, I suppose."

"Yes, but she didn't have to be so loud about it!" Spiderfrost shook his head with an exasperated sigh. "Honestly, Burnttail, you're lucky that you weren't here when that happened. I may have gone deaf."

Burnttail nudged his friend playfully. "I think you'll be fine."

"Anyway." Dogspot meowed and looked at Burnttail, looking relieved. "I'm glad that you're feeling better. You... really haven't been yourself during the first few days after you found Snake's body."

Burnttail tensed at the mention of his former friend's name. He lowered his head as his chest tightened. "Yeah, I suppose I wasn't."

Spiderfrost nudged Dogspot harshly and shook his head disapprovingly, then looked at Burnttail and rested his tail over the dark ginger tom's back comfortingly. "Don't worry about it, okay? You're all right now. Snake is... in a better place, I'm sure of it. Now, how about we go out to hunt? You are the deputy, after all!"

Burnttail let out a sigh and nodded as he got up. He appreciated his friends' attempts at comforting him, but it didn't really help. "That's... a good idea, actually. How about we go patrol the border with WindClan instead? And..." He stopped as he looked around for a free cat. "Nettlebrook!"

"Yes?" The cream-and-white she-cat raised her head from where she was speaking with Whitealder. She got up and padded toward the deputy. "Is something wrong?"

Burnttail shook his head. "No, everything's fine. I want you to lead a hunting patrol, and take... take your kits with you. They don't seem too tired after training. It will be good for them to get out into the territory some more."

Nettlebrook looked toward her kits, who were still chattering excitedly, and nodded. "All right." She dipped her head to the deputy before padding away to collect her kits.

Burnttail turned his head to look back at his friends. "Let's go, then." He spoke before turning around and diving in the river, swimming to the other side quickly. He jumped out and shook out his fur before heading toward the WindClan border, his friends following close behind him. He flattened his ears as the roar of the distant rushing water reached him, flicking his tail nervously. *I never liked going near the gorge. That place isn't safe.*

"Burnttail? Are you all right?" Spottedfur asked, her voice barely audible as she padded alongside him.

The tom blinked, snapped out of his thoughts, then nodded. "Yes, sorry, I just... don't like going near the gorge. I remember hearing from the others that many cats died there. It's not a safe place."

"I agree." Spiderfrost hissed as he looked forward. "No cat likes going near the gorge. We always avoid it as much as we can."

Burnttail approached the abandoned Twoleg bridge, which lay almost ironically peaceful above the river, the rushing gorge waterfall just inches underneath it. The deputy padded closer to the edge and unsheathed his claws to dig them in the ground as he peered down, flinching back as he saw how far down the river was and how violent and raging it seemed to be.

"Don't get too close, Burnttail!" Dogspot's warn cut through the roaring sound. "The ground from underneath your paws can sometimes collapse if you're standing too close to the edge."

Burnttail blinked in surprise, then dipped his head as he turned around slowly and padded closer to his friends. "All right. Thanks for telling me, Dogspot."

The pale brown she-cat nodded, her narrowed eyes betraying her concern. "No problem!"

Spottedfur approached the Twoleg bridge and sniffed the air before jumping back as she wrinkled her nose. "WindClan didn't trespass, but they still think. At least they have a brain."

Burnttail purred in amusement and nodded, then frowned when he saw Spiderfrost sitting on the other side of the Twoleg bridge and watching the river with his ears angled forward. "Is something wrong?" He called out worriedly.

Spiderfrost looked up at him and shook his head. "Oh, no, sorry. I just thought I saw something..." He murmured and sniffed the air.

Burnttail blinked in confusion and padded over to join him, sniffing the air. But he didn't catch any odd scent.

Spottedfur and Dogspot followed them with their ears perked up. Spiderfrost tensed up suddenly and sniffed the air, looking at a bush in front of him.

Burnttail approached him and unsheathed his claws, looking at the bush with narrowed eyes, unsure what he was expecting to see.

Suddenly, a high-pitched shriek reached his ears as a water vole sprinted out of the bush and ran past them. Burnttail blinked and stumbled, taken aback as he turned around, but Spottedfur was faster. She immediately ran after the prey and pounced on it, killing it quickly as the water vole's shriek cut off abruptly.

Dogspot purred in amusement and nudged Spiderfrost playfully. "Woah, that was so dangerous, Spiderfrost! You could've died! Thank StarClan you didn't go near the bush!"

Spiderfrost snarled at her as he took a few steps back, clearly embarrassed. "Shut up, Dogspot."

Burnttail purred and looked after Spottedfur. The spotted she-cat was already padding back toward them, holding the water vole proudly in her jaws as she swung it from side to side. "I caught it!"

"Nice catch!" Burnttail meowed. "Anyway, I think we should go back to camp. We patrolled *and* caught something to take back."

Dogspot nodded. "I agree, let's go."

Burnttail turned around and padded back toward the cmap, flicking his gray tail. His friends were following close behind, with Spottedfur trotting ahead as she held the water vole proudly.

Spiderfrost rolled his eyes. "You only caught that thanks to me, by the way." He scoffed, amused.

Spottedfur purred, but didn't say anything. Burnttail dived back in the river and swam across quickly, eager to get back into the camp. He got out and shook out his fur as Spottedfur dropped the water vole in the fresh-kill pile and stretched beside it. Dogspot and Spiderfrost murmured something to one another in amusement as they followed her and sat beside her.

Burnttail looked around and saw that Nettlebrook and her kits weren't back from hunting yet, so he decided to leave the evening patrols for later. He joined his friends and grabbed a trout from the fresh-kill pile, licking his muzzle as he dropped it to his paws and started taking bites out of it. Dogspot, Spiderfrost, and Spottedfur picked out prey for themselves too, all while the sun was floating carelessly on the pale, clear blue sky high above them. It was a peaceful day.

Chapter 22

"Nice catch, Acaciapaw!" Burnttail purred as he approached his apprentice, who was just lifting her head from the river with a fish in her jaws.

The apprentice dropped it next to a minnow and a water vole she'd caught earlier that day. She got up and looked at her mentor, her eyes wide with delight. "Thanks!"

"At this rate, I'm sure you'll become a warrior in no time." Burnttail complimented, then shivered as the cold leaf-fall wind ruffled his fur. He looked up and frowned at the dark clouds gathering on the sky. "Leaf-bare will arrive soon, so we need all the prey we can catch. Come on, let's go back. Do you need help with your prey?"

Acaciapaw shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Thanks."

Burnttail nodded and turned around, padding back to camp. Acaciapaw followed him closely, carrying her prey by their tails. Burnttail dived in the river and swam to the other side, waiting for his apprentice before padding in the camp. The ginger she-cat rushed toward the fresh-kill pile and dropped her prey before heading straight for the apprentices' den.

Burnttail looked around and approached Spottedfur and Spiderfrost with a soft, tired sigh. "Hey there."

Spiderfrost blinked up at him. "Oh, you're back! Hi, Burnttail."

Burnttail dipped his head before turning, sighing as he remembered his duties. "Time to do patrols again."

"Wait, before that," Spiderfrost interrupted him quickly, his amber eyes darkening with worry. "Have you seen Dogspot?"

Burnttail blinked, taken aback by the question as he shook his head. "No, I haven't. Why?"

"She hasn't returned from the dawn patrol..." Spiderfrost frowned, his eyes narrowed with worry. "Bouldershade and Swiftbrook returned without her, and said Dogspot told them to go ahead as she went to gather some prey she caught. No cat has seen her since."

Burnttail tensed with alarm. He looked at Spottedfur with a hopeful glance. "Do you know where she is?"

Spottedfur's eyes narrowed and she shook her head, her fur standing on end. "No? I thought she would come back with you."

"We need to look for her." Burnttail decided, his stomach feeling heavy with dread as he got to his paws quickly. "I'll sort out patrols after we come back. Let's go!"

Without waiting for a response, the deputy turned around and dived in the river, quickly swimming to the other side. He got up and shook out his fur before he stopped to look around, struggling to remember the patrols he'd made that morning. "She was part of the patrol that went to patrol the border with ThunderClan, right?"

Spiderfrost nodded. "I think so. Come on!" He meowed and sprinted in that direction without a second thought.

Burnttail followed him, his vision growing blurry with worry. Border with ThunderClan again. The place where they found... he quickly pushed that thought away. *StarClan, please let Dogspot be all right. Please!*

Adrenaline and fear rushed through him as he jumped down the path that led downward toward the river. He skidded to a halt on the muddy ground and looked around desperately, sniffing the air to no avail. "Dogspot?" He called out, his voice trembling. "Are you there? Dogspot!"

"Dogspot, it's us!" Spiderfrost called, stopping next to Burnttail as he looked around with bristling fur. "Dogspot?"

Spottedfur's short, icy shriek was enough to make Burnttail's blood run cold. He turned around and approached her slowly, his paws

growing heavier with every step. "What happened?"

"I found Dogspot, but..." Spottedfur trailed off.

Burnttail followed the she-cat's gaze slowly and froze when he saw Dogspot's body on the ground, her legs dangling down into the river as water splashed around her limp, white paws. Her fur was full of wounds, blood still trickling down her black chest into a pool underneath her.

No.

His jaw dropped.

"No!" Burnttail shrieked as he ran forward, sinking his teeth gently into the she-cat's scruff to drag her away from the river. "Dogspot, please, not you too!"

"*No!*" Spiderfrost cried out as he jumped forward to help Burnttail, his paws kneading Dogspot's bloodied fur numbly. "No, please... She's my closest friend, she can't... she can't be dead... Dogspot, what... what happened to you?"

"Dogspot, please wake up and answer us!" Burnttail wailed as he sniffed Dogspot's body, but winced back when he caught no other scent than the one of cold, acrid blood. He stood still, listening for any movement or heartbeat, but there was nothing. His ears flattened as he let out a distressed yowl that seemed to ring out toward the cloudy sky. "She's gone! She left for StarClan!"

"This isn't real!" Spiderfrost cried and buried his nose in Dogspot's fur, his shoulders tensing up as his body shook.

Burnttail shut his eyes tight as he did the same, wincing as he felt the once familiar, warm fur now cold and lifeless. She was gone. She could never comfort him again or make him laugh with her stupid jokes. His heart cracked. *First Snake, and now Dogspot... oh, StarClan, how could you be so cruel? Why are you punishing me like this?*

He was vaguely aware of Spottedfur joining them and lying by his side, her entire body tense. The three cats sat there in silence for a

while, until Spiderfrost sighed and got up. He nudged his friends as he backed off.

Burnttail opened his eyes slowly and looked at him with confusion. Spiderfrost opened his jaws to speak, then closed them again as he took a deep breath. This was hard for him. "She deserves a speech, she..." His voice cracked, but he didn't stop. "She shouldn't have died today. Not like this. This was cruel. She always wanted to protect her Clan, ever since we were apprentices. I'm sure she died protecting her Clan today, and... whoever killed her?" His eyes narrowed with hate. "I hope they fall into the gorge and rot in the Dark Forest for eternity."

Burnttail's heart broke. He forced himself to get up and walked back a few steps, joined soon by Spottedfur, whose ears drooped immediately. He sighed as he looked at Dogspot's wounded body, unable to tear his gaze away from her despite the sight making him dizzy. "Dogspot was... a very kind Clanmate. She sometimes trusted too easily, but she was kind and funny, always caring for everyone around her and not hesitating to lend a helping paw even to the ones outside our Clan. She... she didn't deserve this." His voice cracked.

Spottedfur took a deep breath before speaking. "I've known her since... since we were all kits, and I'm sure StarClan will welcome her. She, um..." She shifted her weight, ears flattening. "She may have been killed and terrified, but she had an honorable death I'm sure... The cat who killed her must be a rogue."

Burnttail sneaked a glance at Spottedfur, taken aback by his friend's odd speech, but he shrugged it off as grief. And he had no energy to confront or ask her about it. Not now. Not in front of Dogspot's body. He forced himself to rest his gray tail over Spiderfrost's back in a weak attempt at offering comfort. His heart broke. *Dogspot was the best at offering comfort, and now that she's gone... who will take her place?* He already knew the answer. *No one can.* "Let's... let's take her back to camp. She deserves to be sat vigil for." He murmured quietly, his mouth running dry. *Vigil.*

He was going to sit vigil for Dogspot. His friend. Another cat he lost.

He hated it. Hated it all. *This is unfair.*

He hesitated before stepping forward and lowering his head, gently picking up Dogspot by her scruff. She was surprisingly light, he realized with a pang. Blood dripped from her fur as Spiderfrost rushed to help him carry her. Spottedfur stood frozen for a few more heartbeats before taking the lead toward their camp.

Burnttail and Spiderfrost padded after her in complete silence, both helping one another carry Dogspot. He felt cold and his stomach twisted as they dived in the river together and swam back slowly, keeping Dogspot's head above water during the entire time. They padded into the camp and gently lowered Dogspot's body to the ground before shaking out their furs.

They were immediately met with shocked gasps and bewildered yelps. Cats began rushing forward and asking questions, overwhelming Burnttail as he took a step back. Frecklestar padded forward, raising her tail to silence her Clanmates as she gazed at the body with wide, bewildered eyes. "Dogspot?" She breathed out, then looked up at Burnttail. "What happened?"

"We... we don't know." Burnttail shook his head sadly, grief and guilt clawing at his heart. His chest squeezed painfully. "We found her dead by the river, and-"

"ThunderClan! ThunderClan did it!" Tornfeather suddenly growled, baring his teeth as he rushed forward. "We should attack them and make them pay!"

Burnttail's head snapped up to stare at him, frustration welling in his heart. "It wasn't ThunderClan who did this, I'm sure." He snarled, unable to believe how easily accusations already flew around. "I didn't catch any ThunderClan scent on her body, and we found her on our territory. There's no reason for ThunderClan to trespass just to kill one of our cats. They already own Sunningrocks, there's nothing they could want from us."

"Burnttail is right." Frecklestar nodded with a warning glance at Tornfeather, before her ears drooped as she gazed back at Dogspot's body. "She didn't deserve this. We will sit vigil for her now."

Tornfeather scoffed, but said nothing, his ears twitching with irritation.

Swiftbrook, Dogspot's former mentor, stepped forward and looked at the she-cat's body, her eyes glassy with grief and head lowered. "Oh, my apprentice... She was always so well-behaved and never complained when she had to do the nastier duties. She grew to be a fine warrior, and I've always been proud of her, but... she had her whole life ahead of her still. She was too young to die. May StarClan welcome her."

Spiderfrost let out an grief-stricken wail and crouched down to bury his nose in Dogspot's fur, his body trembling and his tail twitching wildly.

Burnttail's paws felt heavy as he forced them forward. He crouched down by his friend and rested his tail on the tom's back before closing his eyes, burying his nose in Dogspot's fur as well. He winced; her body had grown even colder. *Spiderfrost and Dogspot have known each other for so long, and she's always been so kind to me and... oh, StarClan, why? Why did you have to take Dogspot? What did she do to deserve this?*

Spottedfur joined them after a few more heartbeats, moving slowly as she lay next to them; Burnttail could feel her tense up and tremble. He was aware of more cats joining them, murmuring comforting words, complimenting Dogspot, or cleaning her fur, but Burnttail paid them no mind. He squeezed his eyes tight as his body shook, his heart breaking in a million pieces. He felt sick. *What did Dogspot do to deserve this? Nothing! Oh, StarClan, why do you enjoy watching me suffer? Why do you enjoy punishing me like this? What did I ever... oh, Dogspot, I'm so, so sorry. You didn't deserve this.*

His fur bristled with determination as his heart began burning with anger and hatred, his claws sliding out involuntarily. His fur felt hot with the need for justice. *I'll find out who did this to you, I promise. And to Snake. And they'll pay.*

Chapter 23

Burnttail led Acaciapaw back to camp, holding his head high proudly as he carried two salmon by their tails. A few days passed since Dogspot's death, and he had been keeping himself busy by partaking in as many patrols as he could to try to find out who killed her, but to no avail. His heart had burned with the need for revenge, but as more and more days passed, he couldn't help but feel lost and accept, with a heavy heart, that he may never find out the truth. Spiderfrost had been hopeful, but as he saw that nothing changed, he had grown sadder and distanced himself from his Clanmates. Burnttail, however, refused to give up and kept himself busy for as long as he could.

The deputy swam out of the river and shook out his fur before padding toward the fresh-kill pile and dropping his prey. Acaciapaw followed his example and looked at him, purring with joy.

Burnttail nodded to her, feeling proud. "You've come far, Acaciapaw, and I'm proud of you. You know, I think you're almost ready for your warrior assessment. Just a few more days and you'll earn your warrior name, I'm sure of it."

Acaciapaw gaped as her green eyes widened with surprise and honor. "Thank you, Burnttail! I'll do my best to make you proud!"

Burnttail nodded, then Acaciapaw turned around and rushed toward her siblings. He looked after her before sighing heavily, letting his shoulders slump with exhaustion. Leaf-bare had nearly arrived, and despite the colder weather, the rivers hadn't frozen yet. *RiverClan will thrive,* he thought as he anxiously gazed at the dark clouds gathering in a mass on the sky, cooling the air and casting long, ominous shadows over the camp. He then looked around for Spiderfrost and Spottedfur before noticing them talking in hushed tones by the warriors' den. He padded over, and Spiderfrost perked up when he saw him.

"Hey." Burnttail greeted them as he sat down. "I think I'll let

Acaciapaw have her warrior assessment very soon. I wonder what name Frecklestar will give her... maybe something in honor of her energetic personality and desire to learn? I swear, sometimes I can hardly get her to listen to me. All she wants to do is run ahead and train by herself."

Spiderfrost's whiskers twitched as he lifted his head, eyes bleary. "Maybe Acaciaspring or Acaciaheart? But either way, I'm sure that Frecklestar has some great names in mind for her and her siblings."

Burnttail nodded. "I agree."

"Probably." Spottedfur murmured before she stretched, yawning as she got to her paws. "Anyway, I'm hungry, so I'll go grab something from the fresh-kill pile. Do you two want me to bring you something?"

Burnttail flicked his tail as he thought. His stomach growled with hunger, so he nodded. "Yes, actually! I'd like any type of fish, please."

But Spiderfrost shook his head, avoiding looking at her. "No, thanks. I'm not hungry."

Spottedfur looked at her brother, her ears flattening. "Spiderfrost, you've barely eaten anything since Dogspot died. She wouldn't want this for you. Please, just let me get you something to eat. Even a tiny minnow."

Spiderfrost flinched when Dogspot's name was mentioned. He sighed and pawed the ground, visibly upset. "All right."

Spottedfur nodded and let out a relieved sigh. She looked at her brother for a few more heartbeats with a narrowed, pointed gaze, which Burnttail assumed was concern, before she turned around and rushed toward the fresh-kill pile.

Burnttail looked back at Spiderfrost and nudged him gently, trying to be reassuring. "She's right, Spiderfrost. Look, I know you want to find out who killed Dogspot, and so do I. I'll find out, I promise, but... this isn't good for you. Try to focus on your duties, all right?"

He spoke softly, his voice weak. Who was he to try sounding reassuring, when he didn't move past her death, either?

"I know, but it's just... I miss her." Spiderfrost whispered, his voice breaking. "She and Spottedfur have been my friends since we were tiny kits, and Dogspot was always so kind... she didn't deserve this. StarClan shouldn't have taken her so soon."

Burnttail nodded, flinching as a vivid memory of Dogspot's bloody body flashed in front of his eyes. He struggled to push it away, blinking repeatedly as he tensed up. "I know. She deserved better." He murmured, his fur standing on end. "Her murderer will *pay* for this, I promise."

"I hope so." Spiderfrost nodded, his tail tip twitching. "Just... don't get too lost in your anger, all right? It's not healthy. Don't do anything stupid, please."

"I won't." Burnttail promised, trying his best to calm himself down. *He's right. I shouldn't get ahead of myself with this, I don't want to do anything dangerous.*

The sound of approaching paw steps made Burnttail lift his head, and he saw Spottedfur pad back toward them, holding two trout and a water vole in her jaws. "Took a while." Burnttail joked as the she-cat dropped one of the trout at Burnttail's paws and the other one at Spiderfrost's before lying down by them and taking a bite out of the water vole.

"Sorry." Spottedfur shrugged as she licked her muzzle. "Couldn't decide what to take."

Burnttail purred in amusement and Spiderfrost nodded, his eyes glinting playfully. "As always. You know, you're a great sister, Spottedfur. Thanks for always worrying about me."

Burnttail saw Spottedfur tense up at that comment. He frowned, but decided not to ask as he lowered his head to take a bite out of his trout.

A sudden, loud choking noise made Burnttail flinch. He raised his

head, alarmed, and froze when he realized it came from Spiderfrost. "Spiderfrost?"

The black-and-white tom didn't respond. Instead, he gasped loudly as he collapsed on his side, writhing on the ground as his paws thrashed wildly, a look of panic in his widened eyes.

Burnttail jumped to his paws, his ears flattening as his blood ran cold at the sight. What was happening? "Spiderfrost?" When the tom didn't respond, he scanned the camp as panic settled in. "Briarpond!" He called loudly for the medicine cat.

The dark brown she-cat was already rushing toward them, her eyes wide with fear as she gazed at Spiderfrost's trembling body. More cats began gathering around to see what was happening, murmuring to one another in shock.

Burnttail darted forward and placed his paws over his friend's shoulder, struggling to keep him still as Briarpond crouched next to him to inspect him. Spiderfrost's breathing grew ragged and he yowled with pain as he started wriggling desperately under Burnttail's paws, kicking up dust with his back paws.

"Stop that!" Burnttail pleaded as he increased the pressure to keep him still, his tail thrashing and ears flattened, his heart beating faster with shock and concern. "Spiderfrost, please, hold on! You'll be okay, Briarpond is here!"

"He's been poisoned!" Briarpond exclaimed before sprinting back to her den. Shocked gasps and hisses were heard loudly from the gathered cats.

Burnttail's heart dropped. *Poisoned? No.* That can't be. Who would do such a thing? He looked back at his friend, ears flattening as the tom's jaws parted in a loud cry of fear, which made Burnttail wince backward, but he still kept his paws firmly on his friend's shoulders. *StarClan, please, don't take Spiderfrost too! You can't do this to me!*

Spiderfrost stared up at Burnttail, his eyes wide with panic and fear. His chest heaved as he fought for air. The deputy froze as he realized his friend was dying. *No!* "Briarpond! Please, hurry!" He

cried, his body trembling with horror.

The black-and-white tom opened his jaws to say something, but all that came out was another loud, bloodcurdling shriek as he thrashed wildly and gasped for air. Burnttail's entire body ran cold as his stomach twisted with fear and dread. "Hold on!" He pleaded desperately as the tom's movements became slower.

Briarpond rushed back in an instant, holding a flowering plant with green, jagged leaves. She dropped into a crouch by Spiderfrost and nudged the plant forward, struggling to get it into the tom's jaws. "Spiderfrost! Eat this, now!"

The medicine cat extended her paw to part Spiderfrost's jaw, but it froze halfway there. The tom had fallen still, his eyes still wide with fear and agony.

Burnttail stiffened.

No. Please.

The deputy lowered himself to the ground slowly as he listened for any movement from the tom. A heartbeat. A paw movement. *Anything.* But there was nothing. The tom was lying limply on the ground, the only movement being his dusty fur ruffled by the cold air.

Briarpond's ears flattened as she shook her head, getting to her paws slowly. "He's gone. I'm sorry, I... oh, if only I reacted faster..."

"*No!*" Burnttail shrieked as his heart skipped a beat. This wasn't happening, it couldn't be. His jaw dropped as he stared at his friend with disbelief . "No, please, not Spiderfrost too!" He cried as his legs gave way underneath him as he collapsed by Spiderfrost's body. He didn't even try to catch himself as he fell, only moving to bury his nose in his friend's body. A chill went through him at the contact; his fur was still warm, but was completely still. He was gone. "No, please..."

He was vaguely aware of Briarpond moving to inspect the fish that Spiderfrost ate, and his Clanmates moving forward and murmuring

comforting words, but Burnttail barely heard them as he stood still with his nose buried in his friend's fur. His stomach twisted. His heart seemed to completely stop in his chest, only beating to keep his body alive. But he felt dead. His friends were *dead*. He lost almost all of them. *Snake, Dogspot, Spiderfrost... StarClan, what did I do to deserve this punishment? Why?*

"They're finally gone."

Burnttail had barely heard the icy words at first. It took a few heartbeats before he processed them.

What?

His eyes snapped open as he jumped to his paws and looked around, shocked to hear such words. His jaw dropped when he realized they came from Spottedfur. The she-cat was standing a few steps away, her eyes glued to Spiderfrost's body. But her eyes were cold; distant, even, with a weird, victorious glint to them.

He felt sick.

Until it clicked.

Burnttail gasped as he took a few steps back, nearly falling backward as realization dawned upon him. "You... *you* killed him, didn't you?"

Spottedfur's head snapped toward him at that, her blue eyes widening with what seemed like disbelief; but the satisfactory glint was still there. "What do you mean by that? I would never!"

Burnttail stared at her in disbelief before he bared his teeth. He unsheathed his claws, forgetting all of his former shock and grief as he stared at Spottedfur... or who he *thought* was Spottedfur. "You killed Dogspot too, didn't you?"

His Clanmates' confused and shocked gasps rang through his ears as Spottedfur backed off, shaking her head. "Burnttail, where is all of this coming from? I didn't kill anyone!"

"Don't you lie to me, Spottedfur!" Burnttail snapped as he jumped

forward. "I heard you loud and clear just now. Don't try to fool me, it won't work!"

Spottedfur stared at him for a few more moments, standing completely still before she let out a low snarl, her shocked expression fading into one of anger and spite. "Finally figured it out, didn't you? Took you long enough."

"How could you?" Burnttail growled, his tail thrashing as he clenched his jaws. "Spiderfrost was your *brother!* And Dogspot your *friend!*" He snapped, then froze as an image flashed through his mind: two deaths in such a short amount of time, and who else had died not long before them?

"You..." Burnttail struggled to choke out. "You were also the one who killed Snake... weren't you?"

Spottedfur looked mildly annoyed at the comment, her ears twitching slightly. "Oh, that troublesome rogue? Yeah, I did. Oh, don't worry, I did everyone a favor by getting rid of her. And just as I was beginning to think you were too fish-brained to figure all of this out..."

Burnttail's stomach twisted. It made sense; everything made sense. All of Spottedfur's odd comments or reactions that he'd simply ignored or brushed off as her being 'concerned' or 'tired.'

He felt like a fool.

"I trusted you!" He snarled, his fur bristling. Betrayal and anger surged through him as he arched his back in an attempt to look more intimidating. He felt hot with outrage.

"Foolish mistake." Spottedfur sneered as she stared at him spitefully. "But then again, that's what ShadowClan cats have always been. And that's what you are, Burnttail: a foolish, ShadowClan cat who joined us out of desperation or guilt and is now pretending to be RiverClan's deputy. *Deputy!*" She hissed and cast a wild look around, as if looking for support, before continuing. "Why isn't anyone else realizing how mad this was? You're a danger to RiverClan, a vermin! So I knew I had to get rid of you, no matter

what it cost. That stupid rogue friend of yours, Snake? I knew she still had your back, so I killed her to ensure you had less cats on your side. A *rogue* friend, may I add! You could've joined forces with her and other rogues to take over RiverClan!" She snapped, her fur bristling and her voice dripping with venom.

She was mad.

Burnttail's frustration was bubbling up with every word the she-cat spoke, and he tried to interrupt her. "Snake would never-"

"Don't you *dare* speak over me!" Spottedfur snapped her jaws dangerously close to his face, which made him flinch backward. "And then... poor little Dogspot investigated her death for your sake. She figured it out, of course; she was smarter than you could ever dream to be. She had noticed black fur with a white spot on Snake's claws and even picked up a faint RiverClan scent on her while you were busy mourning and moaning about her death. She confronted me, of course; she realized I killed her. So I killed her, too. Foolish she-cat, trusting a filthy *ShadowClan* cat and *judging* me for killing a rogue! *Me*!"

Burnttail shook his head in disbelief as his eyes widened with horror, but Spottedfur didn't stop. "Spiderfrost was always weaker than me. He trusted you more than some of his Clanmates *who were born in RiverClan*!" She emphasized heavily on the last part, but her voice was weaker, quieter, as if struggling to convince herself she'd done the right thing. "He would've never recovered from Dogspot's death, that I knew. And he would've been on your side, no matter what. I didn't want to take any chances. So I poisoned him." She said bitterly, but almost too quickly, her tail twitching nervously. Was that a flicker of guilt in her eyes?

Burnttail didn't care. The deed was done. She'd killed her brother and her friend for what, her hate of him? To take *him* down?

He turned his head slowly to look at the fish that Spiderfrost ate, which Briarpond had turned toward him earlier. His heart dropped once he spotted half-eaten bright red berries sticking out of the trout's stomach. *Deathberries.*

Spottedfur had lowered herself to a coward's level in order to get rid of him. And he didn't even have to check to know that his trout was filled with them, too.

Filled with rage, grief, and betrayal, Burnttail ran forward and snapped his jaws near Spottedfur, just as she'd done to him; she flinched back, clearly not expecting that. "All that talk about me being a danger to RiverClan for what? Look at yourself first, Spottedfur! Killing your own Clanmates, your *brother*, just to hurt me? What were you planning to do, *frame* me? *Kill* me? I've been in RiverClan almost longer than I have in ShadowClan! You've stooped to a very low level out of your hate for me! What did I ever do to you?"

"I wanted to *save* RiverClan from further danger!" Spottedfur snapped, her eyes blazing with hate. "And none of this would've happened if you hadn't been chosen as deputy! You know, part of me was actually glad when Troutpatch died. He was too weak to lead! And Frecklestar is even *weaker*, letting Sunningrocks keep ThunderClan out of fear for battle!" She accused, which earned a snarl from the leader, who was watching from a few steps behind. "So I hoped she would be smarter and choose a better deputy, someone who isn't afraid to fight. But no, of course not. She chose *you*."

"Is this really what all of this is about? You're *upset* you weren't chosen as deputy instead?" Burnttail spat, his vision blurry from anger. Did this she-cat really think she was in the right, blabbering about how she wanted to save RiverClan from a non-existent threat? "You've driven yourself crazy with paranoia, Spottedfur. You know, I *trusted* you! We were *friends*!"

Spottedfur scoffed, her tail thrashing wildly as she fixed him with an intent, hateful glare. "Friends? Think again, Burnttail! I *never* liked you, I was just *pretending* so I could learn your weaknesses. But I see now where it all went wrong. I should've killed *you* instead of wasting time going for your closest friends."

That did it.

Burnttail couldn't take it anymore. He flared up. His heart burned

with anger and hate. His hackles lifted.

He'd hoped he could get the chance to avenge Snake and Dogspot for their unfair deaths, and now?

This was his chance.

"Coward!" Burnttail let out a loud, caterwauling snarl and threw himself at Spottedfur, unsheathed paws stretched out as he pinned her down before she could react. He dug his claws into her shoulders as he raked his back claws across her belly.

Dust went up in the air as the spotted she-cat hissed and slammed her back legs into his stomach. Burnttail's eyes widened as the air was knocked out of his lungs. He gasped wildly as he stumbled backward, tripping over his own paws as he tried to regain his footing. Spottedfur used his disorientation to her advantage and jumped at Burnttail, pinning him with ease. The tom shrieked as he fell on his back harshly, his eyes widening with fear and his heart beating wildly as he felt her fangs sink into his throat. He felt her claws slash through his left ear, tearing it as he flinched with pain, a trail of hot blood trickling down onto his head. He hissed as scorching pain shot up in his ear, muffling his hearing slightly.

"ShadowClan deserves to *die*!" Spottedfur spat wildly as her fangs sunk in deeper. "Your stupid Clanmates killed my mother when I was an apprentice, and Frecklestar didn't even *dare* to say anything about it at the next Gathering! She never cared about her Clanmates! She would've let my mother *rot* if it meant preserving the peace. She's too afraid to fight; she's made RiverClan look weak in more ways than should be possible! And now... now it's finally time for me to avenge her properly."

She's insane! How hadn't he realized this before? Burnttail hissed as he struggled underneath Spottedfur's grip, but to no avail; it only made her fangs sink into his throat even deeper. He froze as pain shot up through his entire body. He panted; he couldn't breathe anymore.

He suddenly felt Spottedfur's weight being lifted off him, his throat free of the fang's deathly grip. He gasped wildly for air as his body

trembled. Frecklestar had pounced on Spottedfur, sending the she-cat flying as she stood between her and Burnttail. "Get your paws off him, you filthy traitor!"

Burnttail scrambled to his paws quickly, his chest heaving for air as the wound on his throat stung painfully. "No, Frecklestar." He croaked, his voice weak. "This is my battle. Leave her to me."

Frecklestar looked at him and blinked worriedly, but she nodded and reluctantly stepped to the sides.

Burnttail reacted immediately; as soon as Spottedfur jumped to her paws, he ran up to her without letting her recover from her tumble. He raked his claws across the she-cat's sides as he ran past before turning and pouncing on her again, pinning her down as the she-cat yelped. Her tumble had disoriented her greatly, and by the trickle of blood on her spotted face, she had most likely hit her head hard.

Makes the job easier.

Without a second thought, Burnttail dug his claws into the she-cat's belly and sunk his fangs into her throat, refusing to let go as she writhed under his paws. "You're a fox-heart, Spottedfur. A coward!" He snapped, sinking his fangs into her throat even deeper until he felt blood. "You killed two of your Clanmates, your *closest friends*, and an innocent cat for what, for your own satisfaction? Out of paranoia? You've driven yourself mad by thinking I was a danger to RiverClan, but the real threat was *you*." He snapped, his fangs breaking into Spottedfur's flesh as the she-cat was growing weaker. "The real source of trouble was from inside the Clan you so desperately wanted to protect. You've ruined it by being selfish and a coward, and now... it's up to StarClan to judge you. But I *hope* and *pray* they let *you* rot instead."

Spottedfur was staring into his eyes the entire time, her nose wrinkled up with disgust, but her eyes were wide with desperation. She was afraid. Satisfaction rushed through Burnttail as he realized the she-cat was finally fealing what her victims had felt during their last moments: dread.

She raised an unsheathed paw to claw Burnttail's face, but he

reacted quicker. He bit into her throat even harder, twisting his head awkwardly to snap her throat while slashing his claws across her belly.

Spottedfur let out a loud, pained shriek before falling limp underneath him, her raised paw collapsing with a thud as it sent dust flying into the air and into Burnttail's eyes.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but didn't back away just yet. He held onto her throat for a few more moments, making sure she was dead before he let go and backed off slowly, panting, his muzzle smeared with blood. *Her* blood.

He stared at her body, panting heavily as the adrenaline and anger faded off. And as he stared at her unmoving, limp body, he suddenly realized what he'd done. His stomach twisted in disgust.

By killing her, he'd become a murderer himself. He stooped down to her level. He gulped.

He was vaguely aware of Frecklestar stepping next to him, gazing down at the body with flattened ears. "Burnttail..."

"I know." The deputy spoke softly as he looked away, unable to face his leader. The clearing had grown agonizingly silent, and his fur prickled uncomfortably as he felt everyone's stares on him. "I shouldn't have killed her. I broke the warrior code. I'm just as terrible as she was, but... I avenged Dogspot and Spiderfrost."

"That's not what I was going to say." Frecklestar shook her head quickly and pressed herself against him; he reluctantly allowed it. "You figured out Spottedfur's schemes. I'm proud of you for that, but..." She trailed off as she stared at the she-cat's limp body, her white spots dotted with blood. "How?"

"Despite her belief that she'd done the right thing and her speech about it, she wasn't as smart as she thought." Burnttail huffed, feeling disgusted. "Out loud, she said *'they're finally gone'*. I don't think she meant anyone to hear her, but I did. And I'm glad I did, because if I hadn't, we would've still had a murderer within our Clan. And I doubt she would've stopped after killing Spiderfrost. She

would've went for me afterward. Or worse, *you*."

Frecklestar nodded, seemingly understanding the gravity of the situation. "You're right. But..." She cast a wary glance past her shoulder. "I'm sorry about what happened to Spiderfrost."

Burnttail stiffened. *Spiderfrost.* In his outrage over Spottedfur's confession and desire for justice, he'd nearly forgotten about the tom's death. He turned his head slowly and his heart dropped when he saw the tom lying in the same position; stiff, with his fur fluffed out and jaws parted, still echoing the last agonized shriek he'd let out. But his eyes were closed now; the flicker of pain was gone, but it lingered in his body.

His shoulders slumped, but he sighed and tore his gaze away from the tom's body before looking back at Spottedfur in disgust. "He... he didn't die in vain. Spottedfur's crimes came to light thanks to him. He will rest peacefully now, knowing that his murderer won't get to roam freely. As for her..." He spat at her body as he tensed. "She doesn't deserve a warrior's burial after what she's done. Let me handle her."

Before anyone could object, Burnttail padded toward Spottedfur and grabbed her scruff roughly, wincing as he hauled her cooling body off the ground. It held warmth once, when he thought he was her friend. But he couldn't care less now; all of the good memories with her were fading. She was a murderer, and that was what he would always see her as.

She didn't deserve to be remembered as anything more.

He padded slowly toward the camp entrance and dived in the river carelessly, not even bothering to keep Spottedfur's head above water as the blood dripped from her fur and into the water, giving it a reddish color. He jumped out quickly and stumbled over his paws slightly before regaining his balance and walking away, hissing through her fur. He felt disgusted at having to carry her; all he wanted to do was get this over with. *This... this wicked she-cat killed all of my friends. Her Clanmates. She claimed she wanted to protect RiverClan, but all she did was tear it apart, finishing off the cats who trusted me most one by one. I hope her soul forever rots in a place*

untouched by StarClan or any cat. I hope she spends her afterlife alone.

Frustration welled in his heart again as it blazed with anger. Where was he even going? He had no idea, but he wanted to take her far away from RiverClan's camp. He approached the gorge, but didn't go near the Twoleg bridge and barely acknowledged the roar of rushing water. He crossed the rocky path that led to the bridge and went toward the unclaimed stretch of land that lay beyond it. Feeling sick of carrying Spottedfur and seething with anger, he threw the body against a nearby rock harshly. It hit it with a thump before it collapsed limply to the ground and lay there, its back to him and one of its paw resting against the rock in an awkward position.

She doesn't deserve to be buried. She doesn't even deserve to be called a warrior. Because she's not.

He lifted his head and stared at her over his muzzle, spitting as if he wanted to get rid of the sour taste of blood from his jaws. But it lingered, and he thrashed his tail in frustration. "Not even the crows will want to touch her. She's no better than crowfood."

He was so lost in his anger that he hadn't even noticed Frecklestar had followed him. He flinched when she stopped next to him and nudged him gently, her eyes soft with sympathy. "I understand how you feel, Burnttail, but we can't let her body rest. It will only attract predators. Go back in camp, get your wounds checked, and sit vigil for Spiderfrost, all right? I'll bury this... this excuse of a cat. But I won't be gentle about it."

Burnttail wanted to argue, to protest and say they should just let her be, but he was too exhausted. And, in a way, he knew the leader was right: foxes, badges, and dogs were the last thing RiverClan needed right now. So, he took a deep breath and forced himself to nod. "All right."

Without another word, he turned around and walked back to camp silently, hissing as his wounds began to sting. He was trying not to move his head too much, as it caused more blood to trickle from his throat. Spottedfur's words rang through his ears as he dived into the river and swam back into the camp. He struggled to push them

away: Spottedfur didn't deserve to have a place in his heart nor mind. Not anymore.

He didn't even feel as the same cat from that morning.

He shook out his fur as he got out of the river, his shoulders slumping with defeat and exhaustion. He could barely keep his eyes open anymore, but he forced his paws to move toward Spiderfrost's body.

He felt lost and tired. He felt sick of it all.

It all felt so cruel.

Nettlebrook, Spiderfrost's former mentor, was crouched by him and gently licking the tom's head, her white ears lowered with grief. "He was my first apprentice, and I was so proud to train him, even more so when he earned his warrior name. He was a stubborn apprentice, but grew into a fine warrior. He cared greatly for his friends, and for his sister... He had no *idea* that he would fall to her paws. He was taken too soon by that... that fox-hearted traitor." She spat out the last insult, eyes narrowed bitterly.

Bouldershade, Spottedfur's former mentor, crouched by her and shook his head disapprovingly. "I'm ashamed to know that I once trained her. She was an odd apprentice from the start, staring off and insulting innocent cats when she was in a bad mood, yet I always assumed she was still shaken by her mother's death, but this... she took it *way* too far. She was the real danger to RiverClan. Burnttail did all of us a favor by killing her." He murmured softly, his black fur twitching with unease.

Burnttail wanted to say something, but he was too exhausted to muster up the strength. He approached Spiderfrost's body slowly, his paws numbly carrying him over as they barely seemed to touch the ground. His Clanmates fell silent as he approached and murmured reassuring words, but he ignored them. He crouched by his friend and buried his nose in his fur, wincing instantly. It was cold. Of course. He squeezed his eyes shut as grief and guilt tugged at his heart painfully. *Spiderfrost... I should've realized all of this sooner. It was so obvious. I'm sorry. But... your death wasn't in vain, I*

promise. Thank you for everything. I... I will never forget you, and you can now rest peacefully, knowing that Spottedfur was dealt with. She's gone, and no longer a threat to you, or to RiverClan. I hope you never see her again.

He slumped heavily against his friend's cooling body, too exhausted to hold himself up anymore. He was vaguely aware of Briarpond crouching by his side and gently licking his wounds before applying a healing poultice to them.

He winced from the stinging sensation, but he didn't fight against her. He was too tired, too exhausted. His ears drooped as he buried his nose further into Spiderfrost's fur, his chest tightening with grief.

I'll never forget you, Dogspot, and Snake. I promise, and I hope you're all safe and warm in StarClan, far away from Spottedfur and her filthy plans.

Chapter 24

Burnttail weakly shook out his fur as he padded back in camp, looking around with distant eyes. It was the next day now, and RiverClan was still in shock from yesterday's events. Spiderfrost had been buried that morning, near Dogspot and Snake, and his Clanmates were still whispering and talking about Spottedfur, cursing her and complimenting Burnttail for getting rid of her. But he barely paid any attention to them; he didn't feel like a hero, or worthy of their compliments.

Acaciapaw followed the deputy closely, her eyes narrowed with worry. "Burnttail? Are you all right?"

Burnttail blinked as he was snapped out of his thoughts. He looked at his apprentice and let out a heavy sigh. "I'm fine. Why?"

"You just... didn't seem like yourself today." Acaciapaw murmured, pawing the ground anxiously. "You kept tripping over rocks and stuttered a lot. Look, I'm... very sorry about everything, really..." She trailed off.

She didn't know what to say, of course.

An apprentice shouldn't have to deal with this. Burnttail looked away and nodded slowly. "I'm fine, don't worry about me. You're free for the day, you can go talk to your siblings now."

Acaciapaw opened her jaws to say something, but then sighed and closed them, padding toward her siblings unenthusiastically.

Burnttail opened his eyes and looked after his apprentice for a few heartbeats before scanning the camp. His heart dropped when he realized that no one was waiting for him; the other cats were too busy talking. *Of course.* Just a few days ago, he had been in this same spot, as he had for many moons now, but he would've approached Dogspot, Spiderfrost, and Spottedfur instead, and spend the rest of the day with them. Gossiping, hunting, talking... but he

couldn't do that anymore. Dogspot and Spiderfrost were *dead*, and so was Spottedfur. Their *murderer*.

He was alone, and this feeling was permanent. He would be alone forever. No cat would be waiting for him anymore.

He was alone forever.

His heart ached as he stumbled backward a few steps. He felt lost. He didn't know what to do anymore. He always kept himself busy with his duties and his friends, but now? He didn't have friends to talk to anymore.

What was he supposed to do for the rest of the day?

His ears twitched as he heard approaching paw steps. He lifted his head and saw Frecklestar hesitantly approach him, but he couldn't read her expression. He felt so distant, as if he was from a different world. His leader stopped in front of him. "Burnttail, if... if you'd like, I could arrange the patrols for a couple days, until you recover from... yesterday. I'm sorry for your loss." Her voice was soft, almost comforting.

"No... no, don't be sorry." Burnttail whispered and raised his head, trying to sound confident. "I... I suppose I'm glad yesterday happened, in a way. Because if it didn't, then Spottedfur would still be alive, and we wouldn't know she was a *murderer*. But.."

"But?" Frecklestar prompted gently, her eyes not leaving his.

But I wish things were different. Burnttail sighed and shook his head, deciding against voicing his thoughts. "Nevermind. Don't worry about me, really. I can sort the patrols myself." He meowed, almost fearful at the thought of having to spend the rest of the day without doing anything else. By *himself*.

But Frecklestar stopped him with a flick of her tail. "No, Burnttail. Look, I can tell you're not feeling all right. Take a few days off to rest, okay? You deserve to. The Clan will be fine."

Burnttail tensed. Dogspot had said something similar, once, back when Snake died, nearly two moons ago. *"Look, I'm sure Frecklestar*

will understand. You need to take at least a few days off." He could almost see her kind, reassuring eyes now, looking at him with gentle concern.

He flinched back and shook his head wildly. His heart squeezed painfully in his chest. "I can't!" He wailed, his ears flattening. "I'm the deputy! I already took a few days off from my duties once, after... after I found Snake dead. Almost two moons ago, Dogspot told you." His shoulders slumped when he said their names. "I can't do the same thing again. I can't keep neglecting my duties for every little thing, Frecklestar. I... I'm sorry. I'm a terrible deputy." He breathed out.

Frecklestar winced, her eyes widening with shock. "Don't say that! You're not a terrible deputy, Burnttail. Far from it, even. You're brave and selfless. You went through a lot, yet you still refuse to take a break from your duties. 'For every little thing'? The events from the last few moons are not little things. Don't talk down on yourself, Burnttail!" She hissed with concern before softening, her voice taking on a more gentle tone. "But your health matters more than your duties. You can take a few days off, I promise. You need to rest. The Clan will understand. *I* understand."

Burnttail wanted to wail, but his heart melted from his leader's reassuring words. He nodded with a soft sigh. "I suppose you're right... thank you. But I still want to keep on training Acaciapaw. I won't neglect her now, at the end of her apprenticeship. Not when her warrior assessment is tomorrow."

Frecklestar nodded, looking relieved. "Of course, Burnttail. Just don't overwork yourself, all right? Now come on, go ahead and rest. You've earned it."

Burnttail sighed. "Thanks." He murmured before looking around, unsure of what to do. He didn't want to rest, so he padded toward the camp entrance and dived in the river, carelessly swimming to the other side. He jumped out and shook out his fur quickly, then he padded towards the hunting grounds. Leaf-bare had arrived, but it hadn't snowed yet. He wanted to hunt as much as he could before the first snow.

Burnttail crouched by the river shore and peered down intensely, not letting his shadow fall over the river. When he finally saw movement swim past him, he unsheathed his claws and plunged his paw in the river, trying to catch the fish in his paws, but he only felt water. He sighed and raised his paw, frustrated. The fish got away. *I was too slow.*

When Burnttail saw another movement in the water, he tried catching the fish again, but it swam right past his paw. He let out an annoyed hiss. *This time I was too fast! For StarClan's sake, what's wrong with me?*

Irritated, Burnttail lifted his head and looked around. He flinched when he remembered how often he used to come here with Dogspot, Spiderfrost, and Spottedfur to hunt or patrol. *Or just talk*. He closed his eyes as he felt his heart shatter in his chest. His whole body squeezed uncomfortably. *I don't understand why StarClan wants to punish me like this. I don't have anyone in RiverClan anymore, but... this time I can't leave, like I left ShadowClan a while after Snake did.* He remembered feeling the same way as he did now back when Snake left ShadowClan: hopeless, and unsure of his place in the Clan anymore. Unable to bear the memories anymore, he decided to leave ShadowClan and find a new home elsewhere. It felt like a lifetime had passed since then.

But he couldn't do the same now, too. It was different. He'd been in RiverClan for far too long for that, and he was their deputy. A mentor. The other cats look up to him. And where else would he go? *Become a rogue, kittypet?* He scoffed at the thought. He remembered swearing to be a loyal RiverClan cat, and he decided not to break his promise. *And I can't keep changing Clans every time something goes wrong. That's not fair, nor right. I need to be stronger than that.*

He was snapped out of his thoughts when he noticed movement in the river. He let out a sigh of relief and unsheathed his claws again, patiently waiting as he tried to focus. When the fish was swimming by him, he lowered his head and swiftly caught it in his jaws, sinking his teeth into it before raising his head and dropping the fish by his side, sneezing. *I still haven't gotten used to hunting like this. I hate how it feels when my muzzle is underwater! It tickles!*

Burnttail got up and grabbed the fish, shaking his head to make sure it was dead, then he turned around and padded back in camp. The early leaf-bare air ruffled his fur, but Burnttail wasn't bothered. He dived in the cold river again and swam back in camp. He got out and shook out his fur, then he dropped the prey in the fresh-kill pile and raised his head. Before he could decide what to do next, he saw Bouldershade rushing toward him.

"Nice catch!" Bouldershade meowed with an approving nod at his fish.

Burnttail blinked, taken aback before nodding. "Oh, thanks. It's not much, though. I only caught one fish."

Bouldershade looked at him and twitched his ears. "I know, but it's still something. You know, I was in your paws, too, many moons ago. I had lost a few close friends in a short period of time, and I couldn't bring myself to catch anything for *days* afterward."

Burnttail flinched when he heard Bouldershade's words. He knew the tom was trying to be comforting, but it didn't help. At all. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Bouldershade sighed and dipped his head. "It's all right, it's been many moons since then. But do you know what helped me move on? I kept myself busy by helping the Clan, either going on many patrols or talking to the other cats a lot. It kept me distracted and helped me get my mind off everything. I think you should do the same. It could help you, too."

Burnttail blinked, surprised, then nodded. He'd been doing the same thing for moons now, so it wasn't anything new to hear. But it felt good to know he wasn't the only one going through harsh times. He sighed, feeling grateful for his Clanmate's awkward suggestion. "That might work. Thank you, Bouldershade."

The black tom dipped his head and padded away, probably to go hunting. Burnttail looked around, then rushed toward the elders' den, deciding to check if the elders needed anything. He was padding toward the high end of the camp when memories flashed through his mind. He froze when he remembered being punished

for trespassing into ThunderClan's territory, way back when he was still a ShadowClan apprentice. It felt like a lifetime ago now. He had been punished to take care of the elders and he was heading toward their den, just as he was now. But everything was *drastically* different. His ears drooped as he remembered Brokenflower and Lightskip, ShadowClan's elders at the time. He missed them.

"Burnttail? Are you all right?"

Goosepath's question snapped him out of his thoughts. The gray-and-white speckled elder was staring at him with unreadable, narrowed eyes. Whitewhisker was watching them from his nest, a half-eaten vole resting at his paws.

Burnttail sighed and nodded, pushing his way into the den and sitting in front of them. "I'm fine, sorry. I only wanted to see if you or Whitewhisker needed anything."

Goosepath twitched his tail as he thought before nodding. "I have a tick on my fur and it's been bugging me for days now. Can you send one of the apprentices to remove it, please?"

Burnttail shook his head. "Sure, but I'd like to do it myself, if that's fine." *Anything to stay busy.*

Goosepath looked at him in surprise and he exchanged glances with Whitewhisker, but he dipped his head. "All right, then. You know where to get mouse bile from, right?"

Burnttail nodded before turning around and padding toward the medicine cats' den. *Does he know I was an apprentice once?* He thought, amused, as he pushed his way through the moss-draped entrance and into the den surrounded by olive sedge. Briarpond was sitting with her back to him by the sedge wall, sorting her herbs quietly and placing them in a few little caves dug into the ground.

"Briarpond?" Burnttail spoke quietly and approached the medicine cat slowly, not wanting to startle her. "Are you busy?"

"Briarpond?" Burnttail asked, approaching the medicine cat. "Are you busy?"

The dark brown she-cat lifted her head to look at him. She dipped her head in greeting. "Burnttail! No, I'm not, actually. What do you need?"

"Could I have some mouse bile, please?" Burnttail asked, hoping he wouldn't be questioned. "Goosepath has a tick and I want to take it out for him."

Briarpond blinked at him, surprised. "Oh? Apprentices usually take care of ticks, you know. Are you sure you want to do it? You could send Acaciapaw to handle it instead, or one of the other apprentices."

Of course. She's probably surprised that the deputy wants to take care of such a trivial thing. He thought sarcastically as he shook his head. "No, Briarpond. I'm sure. It's not a big deal, anyway. The younger warriors have to do this if there are no apprentices left either way. And since the current apprentices are becoming warriors soon, that will be the case again."

"I know." Briarpond sighed before she turned around to look at her herb storage again. "If you're sure. Anyway, did you hear that RiverClan will have new kits soon?"

Burnttail blinked, confused. "What?"

Briarpond purred in amusement, flicking her tail. "Berryfeather is expecting Bouldershade's kits, and she wants to move in the nursery after Lavenderpaw becomes a warrior. I'm honestly surprised that she managed to train an apprentice *while* expecting!"

Oh! He'd been too busy with his duties and yesterday's events to really pay much attention to the two cats, but he thought he saw them nuzzling once. He purred. "Really? Well, that's great! I'm glad we'll have new kits soon."

"Me too. I wonder if one of their kits will want to become my apprentice." Briarpond murmured wistfully before she turned around and approached him, holding a thin strip of bark with a small wad of moss dangling on its end.

Burnttail bristled when the foul scent filled his nose, hissing with disgust as he took it from the medicine cat. "Yuck! I forgot how disgusting mouse bile smells."

Briarpond purred, amused. "You know what to do, right? After you're done, go wash your paws in a river, but-"

"Don't lick them, I know. Thank you." Burnttail dipped his head to the medicine cat before he turned around and padded back toward the elders' den. When he padded through the entrance, he spotted Goosepath lying on his side in his nest, so he slowly approached the tom and sat down next to him. The elder let out a grunt as the deputy searched through his fur, and when he spotted the tick, he placed the thin strip of bark on the ground and took the moss in his paws. Gently, he lifted his paws and pressed the moss onto each tick.

"Oh, that feels better already!" Goosepath muttered, before letting out a gruff sigh. "Burnttail, listen. I know what you're doing. You're trying to distract yourself from Dogspot's and Spiderfrost's deaths, aren't you? Trying to stay busy?" When Burnttail flinched, he continued with a softer voice. "I don't blame you. I've tried the same thing when I lost cats close to me, but... it's not healthy, you know. Try to remember that they're safe in StarClan now, and watching over you. They're proud of you."

Burnttail's eyes widened with shock, unable to believe that such soothing words were coming from the cat who had spoken out against him when he was appointed deputy. "They are?"

"I'm sure of it." Goosepath nodded, relaxing under the deputy's paws. "You saved us from Spottedfur, after all. You killed that fox-hearted traitor, and you did a great thing, believe me. She would've probably come back if you'd let her live and chased her out. We wouldn't have been safe with her still out there. And who knows who her next victim would've been? Maybe Frecklestar herself. Or even you."

Burnttail blinked slowly, letting the elder's words ring around his mind for a few more heartbeats before nodding. "I suppose you're right." He whispered with a sigh.

"You're a great deputy, Burnttail." Goosepath sighed quietly as he closed his eyes and rested his head on his speckled paws.

Burnttail stiffened at the words, staring at the elder in awe. But he didn't say anything else, and by the sound of soft snoring coming from him, he had probably fallen asleep. He heard rustling behind him, and he guessed Whitewhisker was probably stretching in his nest, but he didn't say anything.

The deputy relaxed slowly, his shoulders slumping as he breathed just a little lighter. The elder had finally accepted him as the Clan's deputy. Gently, as to not wake him up, he continued dabbing the moss soaked with mouse bile on the few ticks scattered through the elder's fur, trying to keep his paws as light as possible. He was silent, but his thoughts raced.

I hope he's right. I truly hope Dogspot and Spiderfrost are proud of me. But.. I can't help but wonder... could their deaths have been avoided if I simply never left ShadowClan?

Chapter 25

Burnttail swam out of the river and shook out his fur, trying to raise his head as high as possible despite feeling exhausted.

Acaciapaw sprinted past him, her fur fluffed out as she squeaked excitedly. "I passed my assessment, right?"

Burnttail looked at her and purred quietly. "Yes, you did. Congratulations. I'll go tell Frecklestar now."

Acaciapaw's eyes widened and she let out another squeak as she started running in a circle, murmuring excitedly to herself before rushing to greet her siblings, who looked just as happy as she was.

Burnttail blinked, surprised, then broke into a purr and looked around for Frecklestar, padding toward her when he saw her. She was sitting by the roots of the ancient willow and was already looking at him. Tornfeather, Swiftbrook, and Berryfeather, the other apprentices' mentors, were all gathered near her.

"Burnttail!" Frecklestar greeted, blinking expectantly. "How did Acaciapaw's assessment go? Did she pass?"

Burnttail nodded and felt his heart swell with pride. "Yes, she did! It went well. She's also *very* excited. She's not even tired at all! I swear, she could probably retake her assessment two or three more times."

Frecklestar purred in amusement and looked at Acaciapaw, who was jumping around her siblings with excitement. "I can see that. Her warrior name will match her personality for sure. I'll start the meeting soon."

Burnttail nodded, then looked at the other three warriors curiously. "How did your apprentices' assessments go?"

"Pretty good." Berryfeather meowed, flicking her pale ginger tail

happily. "Lavenderpaw took it very seriously and managed to catch a lot of prey. I'm proud of her!"

"It was horrible." Tornfeather growled, twitching his ears with frustration. "Sweetpaw managed to catch enough prey to pass her assessment, but she scared most of it away! She would've caught way more if she focused better."

Burnttail huffed and nudged him lightly. "Don't be too harsh on her." He purred, slightly amused, before looking at Swiftbrook.

The long-legged gray she-cat looked at him, her eyes narrowed as she thought. "Grasspaw's went okay. He was a little scared and doubted himself a lot, but he's *very* fast! He used that to his advantage and caught every single prey that ran away from him."

"That's great!" Burnttail purred and looked toward Frecklestar, but blinked in surprise when he realized she wasn't next to them anymore. He looked around frantically, but sighed in relief when he spotted the brown-and-cream leader sitting on the Wetrock.

"Let all cats old enough to swim the currents gather beneath the Wetrock for a Clan meeting!"

Burnttail dipped his head toward the other three mentors before getting up, padding toward the Wetrock and sat by the shallow stream that surrounded it. The other cats were quickly gathering around, but Burnttail's heart dropped when he saw Whitewhisker's body lying in front of the Wetrock, his eyes closed and gray-and-white fur being ruffled gently by the wind. He looked like he was sleeping.

He tensed as the realization dawned upon him. *Whitewhisker died? But he was fine yesterday!* He stiffened when he realized the elder had been silent the entire time and hadn't spoken a word. Maybe he was sick? His stomach twisted with dread. Was it his fault? Could he have saved the elder if he'd told Briarpond about it? He pushed the thoughts away with a sigh. This wasn't the time to doubt himself again. He blinked sadly at the body, his ears drooping. *May StarClan welcome him.*

When everyone else gathered around and let out shocked gasps when they saw Whitewhisker's body, Frecklestar began speaking. "First, I must announce that we have sadly lost Whitewhisker. He was found dead in his nest this morning by Goosepath. Briarpond confirmed that he died peacefully in his sleep. He has lived a long life and served us well for many, many moons. He will be missed. May StarClan light his path and welcome him." She sighed and closed her eyes.

Burnttail, along with the other cats, remained silent for a few more heartbeats before Frecklestar opened her eyes and began speaking again. "We will sit vigil for him after the meeting, but I have a few more things to announce before that. First, four apprentices are ready to become warriors. Acaciapaw, Lavenderpaw, Sweetpaw, and Grasspaw, please step forward."

The four apprentices quickly stepped forward, looking both proud and troubled by Whitewhisker's death. Acaciapaw looked energetic and happy, her tail tip twitching excitedly; Lavenderpaw looked proud, holding her head high; Sweetpaw looked curious and as if she was about to jump out of her pelt, her entire body trembling; and Grasspaw looked scared, his ears flattened and shoulders slumped.

Burnttail blinked in surprise when he saw how anxious Grasspaw looked. He sighed. *Is he scared that something will suddenly go wrong and he won't get his warrior name? Oh, poor thing.* He tried to catch Grasspaw's gaze, and when the apprentice looked at him nervously, he dipped his head reassuringly. The apprentice seemed to brighten up slightly.

"Do you four promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Frecklestar asked, looking at the apprentices.

"We do!" The apprentices promised in unision, which earned amused purrs from the gathered cats. Burnttail purred when he saw how close the siblings were.

Frecklestar's whiskers twitched with amusement. "Then, by the powers of StarClan I will give you your warrior names. Acaciapaw,

from this day forward, you will be known as Acaciaspark."

The ginger she-cat with a cream belly raised her head, her green eyes sparkling with joy as she puffed out her chest with pride.

Acaciaspark! Burnttail purred as he looked at his apprentice. He felt warm with pride, and his heart lit up with joy. For a moment, he could breathe a little easier, momentarily forgetting about his struggles and loss. He had done it; he finished training his apprentice. *I'm so proud of her.*

"Lavenderpaw." Frecklestar moved on. "From this day forward, you will be known as Lavenderpurr."

The long-furred white she-cat with ginger and black splotches looked surprised, but then purred and twitched her ears excitedly. Burnttail could see the lavender still being wrapped around the young she-cat's ear. He purred in amusement.

"Sweetpaw." Frecklestar meowed. "From this day forward, you will be known as Sweetpetal."

The white she-cat with ginger-brown dapples blinked in surprise, but then purred and dipped her head respectfully.

"And Grasspaw." Frecklestar started.

The cream tabby tom flinched and looked up, his eyes widening slightly. Burnttail blinked, tilting his head in confusion

Frecklestar's eyes flickered with amusement. "Don't worry, I'm not going to eat you. From this day forward, you will be known as Grassfoot."

Grassfoot looked relieved and he let out a sigh. Burnttail purred, then raised his voice. "Acaciaspark! Lavenderpurr! Sweetpetal! Grassfoot!" He chanted loudly.

The rest of the Clan soon joined him. The four new warriors looked both proud and ashamed before backing off to sit in the crowd again.

When the chanting died down, Frecklestar began speaking again. "There are two other things that I want to announce. Berryfeather will now move to the nursery, as she is expecting Bouldershade's kits and is free to do so upon finishing training her apprentice."

Bouldershade looked overjoyed as he touched his nose with Berryfeather's. Lavenderpurr blinked at them from where she sat, surprised, then dipped her head to her former mentor. It seemed as if not even the new warrior was aware of the news.

"And Tornfeather wishes to retire to the elders' den, now that he finished training Sweetpetal." Frecklestar meowed before looking at the short-tailed black tom. "Tornfeather, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go join the elders?"

Tornfeather dipped his head as he took a step forward. He looked nervous. "It is."

Frecklestar nodded. "Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. You have served your Clan well, and we hope that your days in the elders' den are peaceful. Your stories and wisdom will still have a place in the Clan, and we will continue to learn from you."

"Tornfeather! Tornfeather!" The Clan chanted the new elder's name happily.

Tornfeather dipped his head again, purring, then he turned around and padded off toward Goosepath. The gray-and-white speckled tom greeted him with a nod, then sighed and looked back at Whitewhisker's body, his ears flattened and eyes narrowed with grief.

Frecklestar lowered her head and looked at the pale gray-and-white tom's body as well, her shoulders slumping. "We will now sit vigil for Whitewhisker and bury him in the morning. Meeting dismissed."

The leader jumped off the Wetrock elegantly and crouched by Whitewhisker's body, burying her nose in his fur with a quiet sigh. A few other cats joined her, but Burnttail hung back, hesitating. *I*

wasn't too close to Whitewhisker, so I don't think I deserve to sit vigil for him. I'll let the cats who were closer to him have the chance to. May you find your way to StarClan easily, Whitewhisker.

"Burnttail?"

The tom blinked and turned around as he heard his name. Acaciaspark was padding toward him, her green eyes wide with excitement and pride. "Thank you for training me. You were an amazing mentor, and if I ever get an apprentice of my own, I promise to try and train them as well as you did!"

Burnttail's eyes widened, taken aback, then purred, his heart warm with delight and joy. "Of course, Acaciaspark! I'm happy to hear that. You were a great apprentice, and you've earned your warrior name. Your siblings, too, of course."

Acaciaspark purred, looking too overjoyed to speak. She nodded, her fur trembling and seeming ready to jump out of her pelt with excitement. She dipped her head before turning and rushing to join her siblings again, who were being congratulated by their parents, Whitealder and Nettlebrook. The two warriors looked extremely proud, ears twitching with delight and tails flicking lightly.

Burnttail looked after her with joy before he sighed and looked around, confused on what to do next. *Most cats are sitting vigil for Whitewhisker, and the ones who aren't already went on the dawn patrol... and I can't send Acaciaspark, Lavenderpurr, Sweetpetal, and Grassfoot out, either. They need to rest so they can be ready for their vigil.*

Burnttail looked around the camp, his pelt twitching uncomfortably. He was completely alone now, and he didn't know what to do. He felt awkward, like he wasn't meant to be there. He wanted to do something, but didn't know what. He then realized with a start that he would have more alone time now that Acaciaspark was a warrior.

More time to think.

He tensed, wishing more than ever that his friends were still alive

and standing next to him. *They should've been here for their ceremony.* His heart twisted with grief. *This isn't fair.*

Allegiance Update: 5

RiverClan

Leader: **Frecklestar** - Brown-and-cream she-cat with black spots on her face

Deputy: **Burnttail** - Dark ginger tom with lighter paws, a brown belly and a gray tail with amber eyes. Formerly of ShadowClan

Medicine cat: **Briarpond** - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Swiftbrook** - Gray she-cat with long legs

Bouldershade - Black tom

Whitealder - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Nettlebrook - Cream-and-white she-cat

Acaciaspark - Ginger she-cat with a cream belly, paws and tail tip and green eyes

Lavenderpurr - Long-furred white she-cat with ginger and black splotches

Sweetpetal - White she-cat with ginger-brown dapples and blue-green eyes

Grassfoot - Cream tabby tom with green eyes

Queens: **Berryfeather** - Pale ginger she-cat. Expecting Bouldershade's kits

Elders: **Goosepath** - Gray-and-white speckled tom

Tornfeather - Black tom with a short tail

ThunderClan

Leader: **Snailstar** - Black-and-brown tom

Deputy: **Cloverwhisper** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Medicine cat: **Waspspark** - Tall gray tom with ginger spots

Apprentice, Eagleflight - Brown tabby tom with white legs and a golden muzzle

Warriors: **Petalmist** - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

Hazelfoot - Brown tom with a white leg

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Kestrelstrike - Mottled cream tom

Weaselfall - Ginger-and-white tom

Silentpetal - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes

Emberglare - Ginger tom with a white belly and dark amber eyes

Toadshade - Black tom with silver patches

Elders: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

Blazesong - Ginger she-cat with gray stripes and a white belly with green eyes

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Frostedwillow** - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Medicine cat: **Flintdusk** - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Needlerose** - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Sootblossom - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Wrenpaw - Brown she-cat with cream dapples and green eyes

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Stormfleck - Blue-gray tabby tom

Prickleshadow - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Stonepaw - Pale gray tom with darker markings

Bluepatch - White tom with dark blue-gray dapples and yellow eyes

Breezesong - Black she-cat with pale gray spots and ginger ears and paws

Cloudpath - Gray-and-white tom

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle and black ears

Elders: **Brokenflower** - Ginger-brown she-cat with white paws and a missing leg

Oakgaze - Dark brown tom with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader: **Bearstar** - Brown tom with black stripes

Deputy: **Plumbreeze** - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Birchwhistle** - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Falconclaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Mossripple - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples

Robinswoop - Brown-and-white tom with gray speckles

Lightcloud - Pale brown she-cat with a white belly and muzzle

Mapleheart - Gray-and-brown tabby she-cat

Queens: **Dawnpath** - Ginger she-cat with white spots. Expecting Elmfall's kits

Elders: **Flowerwing** - Tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with green eyes

Violetroar - Purplish-brown she-cat

Chapter 26

A few moons passed since Acaciaspark, Lavenderpurr, Sweetpetal, and Grassfoot became warriors. Leaf-bare came and passed by in a flash, and despite the rivers freezing in the last moon, RiverClan managed to catch plenty of land prey and continued to thrive. Newleaf had arrived recently and the warmer weather was welcomed, but it wasn't enough to thaw the frozen rivers yet.

Burnttail quietly got out of the river and shook out his fur, padding away from the camp as the moon floated peacefully above the silent forest, nearly reaching its highest spot in the dark, clear sky and brightening the deputy's path. The stars were shining dimly as the RiverClan deputy was heading toward a certain direction numbly, almost mechanically.

Burnttail sighed as he approached the border with ThunderClan. He slid down the slope that led to the river bank with ease before turning around and heading to his right, following the river quietly. He stopped once he reached the point where it turned abruptly to the left and sat down, twitching his ears as the distant roar of rushing water reached his ears. He looked down at three specific spots, that once were patches of mound, but life had moved on and grass grew over it, hiding any hints that the ground had once been disturbed.

But the RiverClan deputy hadn't moved on. He didn't forget that his friends were buried here. And he'd spent the last few days searching the territory and even the unclaimed lands beyond for three flowers or plants he considered worthy, and laid each one over one of the graves in respect and longing. And if he'd cared enough to bring one to Spottedfur, despite her not deserving anything in his eyes? He would've searched for any general catchfly.

And over the three graves laid a long cypress branch with leaves draping over each one gently and undisturbed. The moon cast a long, faint and silvery light over the branch, giving the leaves a soft, glowing appearance.

Burnttail let out a sigh and looked at the farthest one to the right, the one that was closest to the river. A red zinnia laid undisturbed over it. "Snake..." He whispered, his stomach twisting with grief once he spoke his former friend's name. "I'm... I hope you're listening right now. I know that it's far too late now, that you've been dead for *moons,* but... I still miss you. I'm sorry for *everything*, I... I wish I could take it all back." He murmured, his voice cracking. "I know I was terrible at showing it, but... I still cared about you. A lot. I hope you're safe, wherever you are."

Burnttail then looked at the grave next to Snake's, his chest squeezing painfully. A couple of bay leaves were scattered across it. "Dogspot, I... I miss you, too. You were so kind and so funny and... you always knew how to make it better." He whispered, feeling as if he was out of breath already. "You were brave for confronting Spottedfur over Snake's death, but that... that got you killed... oh, that fox-hearted coward, I wish I was there. I'm so, so sorry. She tricked all of us, and you didn't deserve to die by her paws."

Burnttail wailed as his mouth ran dry. He felt sick. His fur burned with grief. He shook his head, his vision growing blurry as he looked at the grave next to Dogspot's. A general chrysanthemum was laid gently over it. "Oh, Spiderfrost... I'm so sorry. Killed by your sister... I can't even *imagine* what you felt, being poisoned by your own sister... out of her spite for me." His heart squeezed with guilt and grief as his shoulders slumping. "It's all my fault. I'm so sorry, you didn't deserve that... None of you did. That wicked she-cat..." He growled as frustration welled in his heart, but he sighed and tried to push it away. "But... at least she's dead, I suppose. We're all safe from her now, and I hope you three won't ever see her again. I remember Frecklestar saying she buried her far from our camp and out of our territory. Good. That fox-heart doesn't deserve to be buried in RiverClan-"

"Burnttail? Who are you talking to?"

Burnttail flinched and spun around, startled, but he relaxed when he saw Frecklestar look at him, her eyes narrowed with worry. The RiverClan leader approached him and sat down a few mouse-lengths away from him. She rested her brown-and-cream tail over her white paws neatly before looking at the graves in front of them.

She nodded slowly as she seemed to realize what was happening. "Your friends were buried here, weren't they?" She asked softly.

Burnttail closed his eyes and nodded, lowering his voice. "Yes, they were. I'm sorry, I just... I miss them. A lot."

Frecklestar sighed, her gaze fixed on the graves. "I know how you feel, Burnttail. But-"

"But I can't move on." Burnttail whispered and opened his eyes before looking at Frecklestar, his heart twisting with grief and guilt. "And... I keep wondering if their deaths were my fault."

Frecklestar flinched back, visibly shocked as her ears flattened. "What do you mean?"

"It's just... obvious. I *know* this was all my fault." Burnttail cried and turned his head, unable to look at her. He couldn't stay silent anymore. "Me and Snake - the cat buried closest to the river, the one who Dogspot mentioned was killed a couple moons ago - had an argument when we were apprentices. She left ShadowClan not long after she became a warrior, and... that's why I left, too. The memories and guilt were too much to bear. And the argument? It started because I kept trespassing into ThunderClan's territory. One of their warriors attacked me and gave me my eye scar when I crossed their border accidentally, and I felt so... *angry*. I needed to cause pain to that warrior and annoy the Clan, because in my mind, I thought I would feel better. Avenged." He blurted out.

He could see Frecklestar's mouth drop open and her ears perk up with surprise, but Burnttail didn't stop. He couldn't hold it all in anymore. It hurt too much, so he released all of his pent-up emotions all at once, unable to stop. "I felt so... *guilty* after Snake left ShadowClan. It was all my fault, I know. I couldn't bear staying there anymore, so I came to join RiverClan, hoping I could have a fresh start here. I did, and it was great at first... until it wasn't. StarClan, I regret *everything!* If I hadn't been such a stubborn apprentice and trespassed into ThunderClan's territory just to cause trouble, then the argument between me and Snake wouldn't have happened. We would've still been in ShadowClan, and..." His voice cracked. "Dogspot and Spiderfrost would've both been still alive."

He took a deep breath before turning his head to look back at Frecklestar. The leader was staring at him, eyes wide, mouth wide open with shock. Burnttail winced, wishing he would've shut up instead. He tensed, his fur prickling uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

Frecklestar immediately shook her head to silence him. She took a deep breath and blinked a few times. It was clearly a lot for her. She pawed the ground anxiously, before sighing and inching closer to Burnttail, resting her tail over his back comfortingly. The tom flinched, but he didn't protest.

"Burnttail... I had no idea you were feeling like this. You should've told me all of this sooner." Frecklestar murmured softly, her eyes blinking at him sympathetically. "Please don't blame yourself, none of this was your fault. There's nothing to regret. You were an apprentice when you were attacked, right?" When Burnttail nodded, she continued. "That ThunderClan warrior was a fox-heart. You trespassed by mistake, you clearly hadn't meant to. He shouldn't have attacked you. It wasn't fair, and you were upset for good reason. You shouldn't have trespassed, yes, but your anger is to be understood. As it should have, too. Your former Clanmates should've been more understanding."

Burnttail wanted to protest, to say that he had no reason to cause so much trouble over one attack, but Frecklestar continued before he could. "You were an *apprentice*. You were young, of course you weren't going to think clearly. That argument you mentioned? Snake was most likely worried about you. And you were upset and hurt over ThunderClan's actions. But you were both too stubborn to understand what each other felt. As for why she left ShadowClan? I do not know, but I can assure you that it wasn't your fault. That was her decision. Maybe she would've left either way, maybe she made some rogue friends, who knows? And then..."

She took a deep breath before continuing, all while Burnttail stared at her in shock, unable to believe the leader's soothing words. He couldn't believe he was receiving *comfort* over his petty outburst, but he didn't complain. He needed this, he realized. "If you would have never joined RiverClan, then Spottedfur's plans would have never been found out. Sure, maybe she wouldn't have killed

Dogspot and Spiderfrost, but who knows what else she would've done? She hated ShadowClan from the start. You didn't cause the hate to spark in her. Only StarClan knows what sort of trouble she would've gotten us in with ShadowClan instead, but I'm sure it would've resulted in endless battle and countless of deaths from both Clans." She sighed softly. "I still remember her words from the day she died. She called me weak. I don't doubt that she would've tried to kill me. And most likely would have succeeded, who knows?"

Burnttail hadn't considered that. Endless battles with ShadowClan? He shivered at the thought. Would he have even lived as long as he did now, had the circumstances been different and he stayed in ShadowClan? He wasn't sure.

Frecklestar hesitated before speaking again, seemingly out of breath. "And need I remind you that *you* were the cat who figured out what that vicious rogue group truly wanted when they attacked us relentlessly? If you hadn't joined us, then we would've never figured it out. There would have been far more battles with the rogues, I'm sure. And I'm certain that Troutpatch wouldn't have been the only cat to die during that night." She sighed softly. "So, RiverClan would have faced a traitor from the inside and endless battles with both ShadowClan and a rogue group. We would've fallen apart in just a few moons until nothing remained of us. So..." She trailed off before looking at Burnttail and let out a quiet purr. Was that gratitude in her eyes? "Don't regret anything, Burnttail. You saved us from destruction, whether any of us realized this before or not. You're a hero. If you would have never joined us, then RiverClan would have most likely collapsed, and nothing would've remained of us. And the other Clans would have probably followed: ShadowClan first, from the amount of fights between us and them, and then that rogue group would've taken over the other two Clans, too. And Spottedfur might have joined them instead. So, she would have won. But she didn't. Thanks to you."

Burnttail stared at her in disbelief, his paws numb with shock. He hadn't considered any of this, and hadn't thought about how many things would have been different if he stayed in ShadowClan instead. *Did I truly save all of the Clans with a simple decision?* He

wasn't sure he fully believed that, but it felt comforting.

If the price to pay for all of the Clans' survival was him suffering throughout his life, then so be it. He wasn't sure he believed all of Frecklestar's words, but they helped comfort him. Was StarClan proud of him? He wondered with a glance at the twinkling stars above. Was he a hero? The thought seemed almost funny. He didn't feel like one, but he felt grateful to Frecklestar. "I didn't think about it this way..."

"I know." Frecklestar murmured softly, her eyes full of sympathy. "Everything happened with a reason. I know it hurts to hear that sentence, but it's true. You went through a lot, and your life was harsh, but you pushed through and saved all of us. And you've acknowledged your mistakes from the past and feel guilty, which shows you've grown. You've made up for all of your mistakes. You've saved both RiverClan and the other Clans, so never feel guilty about your decisions. You're a strong and brave cat, and I'm proud to have you as my deputy, Burnttail. There is no other cat more fit for this role than you." She purred, her eyes warm as she looked at him. She meant every word. "You will be a great leader one day, I'm sure of it."

Burnttail's heart melted. He nearly collapsed with pride, but Frecklestar quickly let him lean on her for support. He felt out of words: he didn't know what to say. But he felt lighter, as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulder. A weight that had been wearing him out for moons now. "Thank you, Frecklestar. I mean it, really. But..." He sighed, his shoulders slumping again as he glanced at the graves next to them. "I'll still miss my friends, and I won't forget about them, no matter how big of a hero I am or become. I still wish their deaths could have been avoided."

Frecklestar nodded, her eyes flickering with pity. "Of course, it makes sense. They were your friends after all, and their deaths were cruel. You know, this means you're a real friend. You're allowed to miss them, of course. They were great cats, and RiverClan will miss them. But I' sure they're *very* proud of you, Burnttail. You found out about Spottedfur's plans and put an end to her tirany. They can rest peacefully now, knowing that both RiverClan and you are safe." She murmured softly before nudging him gently. "Do you feel better?"

"I do." Burnttail nodded and let out a heavy sigh that seemed to carry endless moons of worry and guilt. But once it left his jaw and disappeared into the cold night air, he immediately felt lighter. He fixed his posture and looked toward the moon, purring quietly. His heart finally seemed to relax in his chest. "Thank you for everything, Frecklestar. You've helped me more than you think. You're a great leader."

The brown-and-cream she-cat dipped her head in gratitude, looking relieved before nodding toward the direction of the camp. "Anytime. Now, I think I'll head back to sleep. You should come, too. You've earned your rest." She spoke softly. The ground near her paws seemed to shimmer softly, but Burnttail brushed it off. He felt tired; it was probably the moonlight playing tricks on his vision.

Burnttail nodded and got up slowly, stretching out his paws. "All right, I will. And... thank you again, truly." He murmured, unsure how to show his gratitude enough.

"Anytime. And don't worry about looking rude, I can tell how grateful you are. And honestly? I'm just glad you're feeling better." Frecklestar purred, flicking her ears with relief before padding back to camp.

Burnttail followed her silently, his thoughts falling quiet as they walked, which hadn't happened for a long time now. Frecklestar was a great leader, he thought. But he knew she was on her last few lives. *I hope I don't have to take her place too soon. I don't think I could be as great as her, and RiverClan isn't ready to say good-bye to their leader yet*, he mused with a pang.

As he walked, Burnttail suddenly remembered Spottedfur's enraged outburst from the day her crimes came to light, claiming that a ShadowClan patrol had attacked and killed her mother, while Frecklestar did nothing. Burnttail hadn't heard anything about such an incident while he was in ShadowClan, and he briefly wondered if he should ask Frecklestar about it. But he pushed the thought away with a flick of his tail. *Spottedfur isn't important anymore. Whether she was telling the truth or not, she doesn't deserve the satisfaction of being remembered, not by me or by the others. It would only take up an unnecessary amount of space in my memory.*

Burnttail's ears twitched as he listened to the sounds around them. He could hear the roar of rushing water coming from the gorge, but it felt very distant. He was safe and nowhere near the gorge. He didn't need to worry about it now. Prey was scurrying around bushes and trees, looking for food or a place to rest. Bushes rustled softly as gentle breeze came to life and seemed to whisper soothingly around him. Life was moving on and recovering after a long and cold leaf-bare.

The deputy dived in the river and swam back in the camp quickly. He then got out and shook out his fur, then he silently padded toward the warriors' den as he felt exhaustion creep up on him. Before he went in, however, he turned and dipped his head toward Frecklestar. The leader nodded at him, her eyes flickering with relief and respect before she disappeared into her den.

Burnttail purred, then turned around and sneaked into the warriors' den, trotting lightly around his Clanmates as to not wake them up. He stiffened when Whitealder groaned from his nest, but the white-and-ginger tom didn't stir, instead rolling over in his nest before falling silent again.

He sighed with relief before padding over to his nest at the center of the den. He lay down slowly, then slumped down with exhaustion. He yawned and closed his eyes, resting his head on his light ginger paws as he drifted off into sleep, feeling lighter and at peace for the first time in moons. He felt like he could breathe again.

Cats still cared about him. The others still looked up to him.

He felt like he belonged again.

Chapter 27

A moon passed since Frecklestar and Burnttail talked by his friends' graves. The tom had received the comfort he had so desperately needed, and it made him feel way better. He'd been breathing lightly ever since, and wasn't fighting to keep himself busy from having time to think anymore. The comfort he received had lifted most of his worries and doubts, and he didn't feel like he was carrying an entire mountain on his shoulders anymore.

Burnttail swam out of the river and shook out his fur, leading Lavenderpurr and Grassfoot back to camp. They were halfway through newleaf now, and Burnttail wanted to lead as many patrols as he could, especially after the rivers had thawed shortly after the night the weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He wanted to catch as much prey as he could find.

He dipped his head toward the two younger warriors after the three cats dropped their prey into the fresh-kill pile. The two cats padded away and the deputy looked around, twitching his gray tail as he scanned the camp for cats who weren't busy.

"Bouldershade, Whitealder!" Burnttail called, rushing toward the two warriors who were sitting by their den.

The toms raised their heads to look at the deputy, their ears twitching with curiosity

"I want you two to lead separate patrols, please." Burnttail spoke as he gazed at them. They didn't look busy; if anything, they looked bored and eager to have something to do.

Bouldershade nodded and got up, twitching his long tail excitedly. "Sure! Who should we take?"

"Bouldershade, I want you to patrol the WindClan border. Don't worry about the one with ThunderClan, my patrol went there already and made sure no cat trespassed. Take..." Burnttail looked

around the camp, squinting his eyes before spotting two cats chatting near the elders' den. "Take Swiftbrook and Sweetpetal with you."

Bouldershade nodded and rushed toward the two warriors. Whitealder turned his head to look at the deputy again.

Burnttail looked around again, frowning when he realized how empty the camp looked. "Whitealder, you're going to lead a hunting patrol with... Acaciaspark and Lavenderpurr. I don't think Lavenderpurr will mind going on another patrol. She still has a lot of energy left."

Whitealder dipped his head. "Of course." He meowed, then let out a sigh. "We're very low on warriors. Thank StarClan Berryfeather is having her kits! RiverClan could really do with more cats around."

Burnttail nodded, frowning as he began to lose himself in his thoughts. But before he could think about anything in particular, he heard a happy shriek coming from the nursery. He lifted his head and saw Briarpond rush out, her tail twitching with excitement. "Berryfeather had her kits! They're all healthy!"

Bouldershade ran past Burnttail immediately, seemingly forgetting about his patrol as he disappeared into the nursery.

The deputy blinked in surprise, then purred as he got up and followed him, aware of a few other padding after them curiously. Joy warmed his once-aching heart as he approached the nursery. RiverClan hadn't had kits in a long time now, and he wondered what the new kits will grow up to be like. *Hopefully they'll be great warriors. Or medicine cats, even.*

Burnttail pushed his way into the nursery through the sedge den, the scent of warm milk filling his nose immediately. He froze when he remembered his days as a kit, protected and unaware of the dangers of the world, but he sighed and pushed the memories away. It felt like a lifetime ago. *Back when I was still in ShadowClan, and Snake was...*

He shook the thoughts out of his mind quickly, instead focusing on

Berryfeather. The tired queen was lying in her nest with three kits squirming at her belly. Bouldershade approached his mate and purred happily, touching his nose with her's.

Burnttail looked at the kits. One kit had completely black fur, just like Bouldershade; one was a pale ginger she-kit with black splotches; and the other kit was very pale ginger with darker stripes and black paws.

Burnttail dipped his head toward the two new parents, his heart feeling warm with delight. *Kits are always a joy to the Clan.* "Congratulations!"

"Thank you." Bouldershade purred and dipped his head back before looking at his kits. "Berryfeather, what do you want to name them?"

Berryfeather looked at her kits, twitching her ears as she thought. "I want to name the pale ginger she-kit Dandelionkit. You can name the two toms."

Bouldershade blinked at her before nodding with a purr. He looked overjoyed. "I want the black tom to be named Shadekit, and the pale ginger one with darker stripes... how about Flamekit?"

Berryfeather nodded, her eyes warm with joy. "Dandelionkit, Shadekit, and Flamekit. I like them."

Burnttail got up and dipped his head. "Congratulations, again! I'll leave you two alone now."

Bouldershade nodded toward the deputy, then looked back at his kits and purred as he nuzzled each one of them.

Burnttail turned and padded out of the nursery, his tail twitching happily. Frecklestar was waiting for him and she raised her head when she saw him. "How are the kits?"

Burnttail dipped his head toward the leader in greeting. "They're adorable! They'll become great warriors, I'm sure of it. And, who knows, maybe one of them will become Briarpond's apprentice."

"Briarpond would be delighted, I'm sure." Frecklestar purred, then

looked at the nursery again. "What did they name the kits?"

"Dandelionkit for the she-kit, and Shadekit and Flamekit for the toms." Burnttail meowed, then got up and stretched, his stomach rumbling with anger. "Anyway, I think I'll go and eat something. I'm *starving*!"

Frecklestar purred in amusement and shook her head in playful exasperation.

"Burnttail?" Swiftbrook suddenly called as she padded toward him. Burnttail turned his head and saw Sweetpetal following her closely. "If Bouldershade is with Berryfeather and their kits, who will lead our patrol? Or should we go alone?"

Burnttail frowned, twitching his tail with irritation. RiverClan had lost many warriors recently, so the remaining ones' availability was extremely limited. *It's all because of that fox-hearted Spottedfur!* He mused, frustrated, but he sighed softly and tried to push the thought away. He didn't want to think about her anymore, not even for a heartbeat. She didn't deserve even the littlest amount of place in his mind, he thought. *It's all right, we're not dead yet. RiverClan is still alive, and we're slowly rebuilding. We have four newer warriors, and Berryfeather's kits will grow up to be great warriors. They will bring good fortune to us.* He thought, then looked toward the nursery. "Hey, Bouldershade! Are you-"

"I'm here, sorry." Bouldershade murmured sheepishly as he emerged from the nursery.

Burnttail blinked, surprised, but he nodded. "All right. Could you still lead your patrol? If you need more time with your kits, I understand. I could lead it myself if not."

Bouldershade shook his head quickly. "No, it's fine. I'll lead it. Berryfeather needs to rest, and I don't want to disturb her." He murmured, then nodded at Swiftbrook and Sweetpetal before they headed off together toward the camp entrance.

When both patrols left, Burnttail let out a sigh and padded toward the fresh-kill pile, his pelt prickling uncomfortably when he found

himself alone again. He sat down beside it and took a water vole, then he dropped it at his paws. He lay down and sniffed it carefully before taking a bite out of it, licking his muzzle at the taste. *Delicious, as always!*

"Hey, uh, Burnttail?"

Burnttail raised his head when he heard his name, surprised to see Grassfoot approaching him slowly. He looked unsure of himself. "Oh, Grassfoot! What is it?"

"Well, I was wondering..." Grassfoot hesitated before he sat down, his tail flicking anxiously. "If you don't mind... could you tell me how you manage to organize patrols? I mean, all you do is look around, walk up to cats and tell them to go patrol, and they listen! It must take *a lot* of confidence to walk up to them so easily. How do you do it?"

Burnttail blinked, taken aback by the question. He purred, twitching his torn ear in amusement. "Oh! Well, it's not really about confidence. I'm the deputy after all, this is what we do. The other cats respect me and trust me, so they listen to me without confronting me about it. They don't doubt me, I think."

"I know, but..." Grassfoot hesitated, his voice quiet. "You just walk up to them so easily, even if they're talking or sharing tongues. How? Sometimes I don't even feel confident enough to approach my own siblings. Aren't you afraid of upsetting the other cats by interrupting them or something?"

Burnttail let out a sigh, purring with amusement. Grassfoot had always been a nervous and shy tom. Kind, loyal, and light on his paws, but *very* shy. The deputy sometimes wondered if Grassfoot was scared of his own shadow.

Burnttail thought for a few heartbeats before answering. "Well, they're my *Clanmates* and they have duties to do, just as I do. It's no big deal if I interrupt them to tell them to patrol. But if I notice they're talking quietly or about something more... private, let's say, I wait a little before approaching them. And don't worry, real Clanmates don't insult you if you approach them to talk to them.

And even if they do, so what? They're either in a bad mood or fish-brained. That's what I think, and I don't doubt myself at all. I just... walk up to them and don't worry too much. If they get upset, it's on them, not me. Besides, you just walked up to me now without a problem!"

Grassfoot blinked in surprise before looking at his paws and nodding slowly. "Yeah, I... I suppose I did. But you're the Clan deputy, and I trust you."

Burnttail purred as his heart swelled with joy at the statement. "Exactly! But you should trust your other Clanmates, too. None of them are scary, I promise. Or... anything like Spottedfur." He shuddered, fighting the urge to spit her name. "RiverClan is safe now, don't worry. We've been thriving since Spottedfur's death, and nothing like that will happen again, I'm sure of it. You can trust your Clanmates, Grassfoot, I promise. They're all great and trustworthy cats. Everything is all right now."

Grassfoot nodded as he looked at him. His eyes flickered with gratitude and his mood seemed to lighten. "Thank you, Burnttail! I'll try to remember what you told me. I'll try to become as confident as you are."

Burnttail dipped his head as he purred. He felt useful and glad that he managed to help the younger warrior be more confident. "No problem. And don't worry about that. You're doing great."

Grassfoot got up and turned around, taking a deep breath before approaching Nettlebrook. His mother was washing herself by the warriors' den and immediately perked up when she saw her son, her ears twitching with delight as she purred a greeting to him.

Burnttail purred as he watched the tom, proud to see him feeling better and grow a little more cheerful. He sighed softly as he looked back at his water vole and took another bite out of it, feeling a little less alone now. His thoughts raced back to his first days as a RiverClan cat. It felt as if an eternity had passed since then, but he had been just as scared as Grassfoot, and was hesitant to approach cats at first, hence why it took a few moons for him to make friends.

His heart twisted with grief when he thought about his friends, but he purred when he remembered how safe and comfortable he'd always felt around them. *Not Spottedfur, but around Dogspot and Spiderfrost. I hope Grassfoot will find friends who will make him feel just as comfortable, but I'm sure he feels like that with his siblings, too. I see myself in him, but if I made it, then so will he. I'm sure of it. I trust all my Clanmates.*

He didn't regret anything: not anymore.

Chapter 28

White, thin, and flat clouds were covering the bright newleaf sun, casting long shadows over RiverClan's camp as Burnttail was talking with Whitealder by the fresh-kill pile. A few days had passed, and numerous patrols had reported multiple rogue scents in their territory and dangerously close to their camp, including that day's dawn patrol.

"How many rogues?" Burnttail asked, his eyes narrowed with worry as he looked at the white-and-ginger tom. *This isn't good.*

"Not a lot." Whitealder meowed, his gaze alert and his shoulders hunched up. "About three or four, but they shouldn't have trespassed. This has been happening for too long now, so me and my patrol tried to follow their scent to drive them off, but it led past the twoleg bridge and into WindClan's territory."

Burnttail frowned, his tail twitching with irritation. Could the rogue groups that had attacked them moons ago be back? *Surely not, it's been too long. Besides, the others would've probably recognized their scent.* "Maybe they were just passing through?" He suggested.

His heart dropped when Whitealder shook his head. "I doubt it. We also found bones. *Prey* bones. And they were fresh, scattered around the border aimlessly."

Burnttail tensed, his ears flattening as he hissed. "I see. If that's the case, then I'll lead a patrol over to the gorge soon, and hopefully we will catch them and-"

"Help! Rogues!"

Burnttail jumped up to his paws in an instant and whirled around, his heart thumping against his chest with unease.

Nettlebrook jumped out of the river, panting, her claws unsheathed

and her eyes wild with fear. Burnttail's jaw dropped when he spotted the fresh wounds scattered through her fur, and he immediately rushed toward the warrior. "Nettlebrook? What happened?"

He didn't need to ask. He already realized what had happened. It was obvious.

"The rogues. We found them." Nettlebrook explained, taking a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself despite staring at him frantically. "I was leading a patrol toward the border with WindClan to see if we could find the rogues, and those... wicked beasts *ambushed* us! We're losing, Burnttail. We need help!"

Of course. Burnttail let out a snarl and looked around, but Frecklestar was already approaching them, eyes narrowed with anger. A few other cats were following her closely, hissing and lashing their tails. "Everyone, follow me to the gorge!" He hissed urgently before looking back at the warrior. "Nettlebrook, lead the way."

The cream-and-white she-cat nodded and spun around to dive in the river. Burnttail, along with the other cats, followed her and they quickly swam to the other side. Nettlebrook jumped out of the river and sprinted toward the gorge without hesitation. Burnttail followed the she-cat quickly, not even bothering to shake his fur as the other cats followed them closely. His heart was thumping again his chest as he ran, the fur along his spine beginning to rise. Thunder roared above them as the darkening clouds covered the whole sky.

StarClan help us.

The roar of distant rushing water echoed in his ears, but it wasn't loud enough to hide the shrieks and hisses from ahead. The scent of rogues filled his nostrils, but he tensed when he picked up another scent: blood.

Picking up the pace, he sprinted past Nettlebrook and jumped out of a bush, hissing as leaves and branches scratched his fur. He halted immediately, his paws nearly slipping over tiny rocks as he

stared in disbelief at the scene in front of him.

Farther up the border, beyond the twoleg bridge and the waterfall, Acaciaspark and Bouldershade were desperately fighting against five rogues near the gorge, clearly outnumbered. The intruders were vicious, snarling and slashing their claws across the RiverClan cats' furs when they were distracted.

Frecklestar landed beside him and let out a loud caterwaul before jumping in the midst of the battle. "RiverClan, attack!"

Without hesitation, Burnttail rushed forward and barreled into a dark brown tom, pinning him to the ground quickly and slashing his claws across the rogue's side. The tom let out a shocked growl, momentarily stunned, but recovered quickly and kicked Burnttail's stomach with his back paws.

The dark ginger tom let out a yowl as he fell backward, gasping for air. The tom jumped to his paws and nudged him harshly with a snarl. The deputy let out a yowl as he fell on the ground harshly, hissing as pain soared up his back. The rogue huffed and slashed his claws across Burnttail's brown belly, and was about to lean down to bite his throat when Burnttail kicked his paws into the rogue's belly harshly and rolled away, pushing himself into the rogue's legs harshly in an attempt to make him fall over. He then jumped to his paws and ran back toward the rogue as he scrambled back to his paws. Burnttail let out a low growl before sinking his fangs into the rogue's tail.

The dark brown tom let out a pained yowl and lashed his tail desperately, but Burnttail refused to let go and sunk his fangs even deeper into his tail. When the tom spun around quickly and snapped his jaws near Burnttail's face, the deputy dodged and threw himself harshly at the rogue, pushing his front paws into his shoulders hard. The rogue shrieked loudly as he was sent flying; he fell over harshly with a loud thump. He scrambled up to his paws and stared at him with wide, dizzy eyes before turning around and running off.

"That's right! Stay off of our territory, flea-pelt!" Burnttail spat after the rogue, then turned around to look at the fight. The other four

rogues were still fighting, but they were very outnumbered now. They didn't stand a chance.

But then he spotted a white she-cat snarling and clawing at Frecklestar, backing her dangerously close to the gorge. The leader tried fighting back, but the rogue kept dodging and backing her closer to the edge.

"No! Leave her alone!" Burnttail shrieked as he rushed toward the rogue, panic settling in his chest.

But he wasn't fast enough. The white she-cat twitched her ear in his direction before she threw herself at Frecklestar, slashing her claws across the leader's throat. Frecklestar gasped as she flinched back, but her back paws fell over the edge. The she-cat fell down with a loud grunt, but before she could dig her claws into the ground, she disappeared from view with a loud, bloodcurdling yowl.

"*No!*" Burnttail's heart dropped as he skidded to a halt by the edge. But he was too late. Frecklestar was falling backward into the gorge, her terrible scream echoing around the walls and lifting into the air. Her paws were outstretched toward him, clawing desperately at the air. Her terrified eyes locked with his for a heartbeat before the she-cat disappeared under the violent currents.

She's gone! Burnttail realized with a start. His heart seemed to skip a beat as he shook his head in disbelief. *No, that can't be true.*

A deafening roar from above made him flinch as rain poured down violently, soaking his fur. Burnttail's ears flattened before he spun around to face the white rogue, snarling at his leader's murderer. His heart thumped violently with the need to revenge. "How *dare* you?" He

Burnttail spun around to face the white rogue, then he let out a loud growl. "How dare you?!" He snarled before lunging at the rogue. He barreled into her harshly, pinning her to the ground and digging his claws into her shoulders. He raked his claws across her belly as thunder roared violently above them. He didn't care if this killed the rogue; he wanted revenge.

The she-cat snarled and lifted her paws, digging her claws into his shoulders and tugging hard. Burnttail collapsed with a yowl, wriggling desperately to free himself as the two cats rolled closer to the edge.

He managed to jump up to his paws quickly, shaking his head as he took a step back, disoriented. But before he could recover, he felt a huge weight slam into him, and he fell over with a loud shriek.

His back paws fell freely into the air. Desperately, he stretched out his paws and managed to dig his claws into the ground, hanging on desperately as he realized what had happened.

He fell over the edge, and was desperately hanging on. He heard the water rushing violently underneath him, waiting to swallow him whole. His heart was beating loudly against his chest as he struggled to get back on the ground, but his back paws kept slipping off the gorge wall. He couldn't find solid ground to dig his claws into.

He was stuck.

The white rogue stepped toward him, staring at him with pride and contempt. "We won!" She snarled and lifted one of her paws off the ground, seemingly to push him off the edge. "This pathetic Clan lost two cats against a couple of rogues! Oh, poor you. What a shame... but not for *us!*"

Burnttail looked frantically toward his Clanmates for help, but his heart dropped when he realized they were all too focused on their own fights. They hadn't even realized Frecklestar was dead.

Had he even processed it? He wasn't sure. But it didn't matter in that moment. He was about to be dead too.

There was no other choice. He had to do this.

His heart felt heavy. His shoulders slumped. He wasn't ready for this. But he had to.

RiverClan came first.

Burnttail stared up at the rogue wildly, baring his teeth at at her while she was lost in her self-proclaimed victory. He snapped his fangs at her. "Maybe they will, but they're not the only ones who will suffer a loss."

The white rogue stared at him, her blue eyes narrowing in confusion and disdain. "What are you talking about?"

"Your filthy group better leave RiverClan alone!" Burnttail snarled as thunder cracked and boomed above them, its roar coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Quickly, he thrust his back paws harshly into the gorge wall and leapt up, freeing his claws from the ground to dig them in the rogue's shoulder forcibly.

But he had let go. He wasn't holding on anymore.

He immediately realized he was falling. But so was the rogue.

Digging his claws further into the rogue's shoulders, he brought her down with him as they fell backward closer into the river. The rogue's eyes widened with shock and disbelief as she cried out loudly. "Wait!"

It was too late.

"You messed with the wrong Clan for the final time. Death waits for nobody!" Burnttail snarled and let go of the rogue mid-way through the fall, pushing himself away from her as he stared up at his Clanmates.

They all stopped fighting and were gathered near the edge of the gorge, peering down at him with wide, frantic eyes and screaming out his name.

Or at least he thought they were. He couldn't hear them over the roar of rushing water that was ready to swallow him whole.

A crack of thunder roared violently from above. Or was it the rushing water? He couldn't tell. But what he was sure of was that he would never find out.

He plunged into the raging river below hard, the cold washing over

him instantly. It paralyzed his body. An involuntary gasp left his mouth as he struggled to thrash his paws in an attempt to swim to the surface, but to no avail. The currents were too strong.

He was being carried toward the waterfall, and his paws felt too numb and cold to fight against the current. He knew this was a battle he would lose, but he accepted it. Or as much as he could. He slipped below the surface and closed his eyes, letting his paws fall limb as water rushed into his ears and lungs. Everything was fading out now, and he could barely hear anything other than the roar of rushing water around him.

Until he realized that had faded out too. Everything fell silent, and soon, he realized, he lost control of his entire body. The currents carried him farther away as he slipped out of consciousness.

Burnttail took a sharp, deep breath as his eyes shot open. He jumped to his paws, his fur trembling violently as he looked around. He stiffened when he didn't recognize where he was. He wasn't being carried away by the gorge anymore, nor safely walking through RiverClan's territory. Instead, he found himself in a bright, starry forest, with a warm breeze gently rustling his fur. He looked around in awe before stiffening as realization dawned upon him. *I'm dead... aren't I?*

"Welcome to StarClan, Burnttail!"

The familiar voice made him flinch. He spun around, shocked to see Dogspot approach him slowly. The she-cat hadn't changed at all; she looked just like she had before she died, except now her pelt was glowing with a strangle light that made it seem like she had stars in her fur. Frost was glittering in her eyes, making them appear like two bright stars.

Burnttail was aware of a few other cats following her, but he couldn't take his eyes off Dogspot. He stared at her in disbelief for a few more heartbeats before he let out a loud wail and jumped forward, burying his nose in the she-cat's shoulder fur without hesitation. "Oh, Dogspot, I... I missed you so much. I'm so sorry for everything..."

Dogspot flinched in surprise, but then purred as she lightly nudged him away with a paw. "Hey, back off, you silly fish-breath!" She hissed playfully, but then sighed quietly. "Listen. It's not your fault that I died, and you know this very well. Spottedfur... truly fooled everyone."

"She did." Burnttail nodded as he took a few steps back then froze as a terrible thought occurred to him. He looked around in alarm, his stomach twisting with apprehension. "Is... is she here?"

Dogspot shook her head quickly, looking almost offended by the question. "No, don't worry. She doesn't deserve to be here. She's exactly where she belongs, rotting in the Dark Forest."

"Good."

A growl from nearby made Burnttail flinched as he turned his head, his jaw dropping as he spotted Frecklestar halting next to him. "Frecklestar? You're here too?"

The leader looked at him and nodded sadly, lowering her head in grief. "I died, Burnttail. After all, you saw me fall in the gorge, didn't you?"

Burnttail froze as Frecklestar's falling form appeared in his mind again, staring up at him with panicked and wide eyes before she disappeared under the raging river. He shook his head and pushed the image away quickly, shuddering uncomfortably. "I suppose I did. I'm sorry." He murmured before looking back at Dogspot.

His breath hitched when he spotted Spiderfrost approaching him, holding his head high as he nodded at him warmly. "Welcome, Burnttail! You know, we missed you. A lot."

"Oh, Spiderfrost..." Burnttail purred, his heart warming with joy at the sight of his old friend. He felt overwhelmed with emotions. "It's so good to see you two again. Are you happier here, in StarClan?"

"I am, don't worry." Spiderfrost dipped his head, his whiskers twitching in amusement. "Me and Dogspot have been watching over you, you know."

Burnttail purred happily, but blinked when he realized something. *Wait, is...?* "Only you two? But what about Snake, isn't she here too?"

His heart dropped when Dogspot and Spiderfrost exchanged worried glances before shaking their heads sadly. He already knew what they were going to say.

"No, Burnttail, she's not here. But she's somewhere else, don't worry! She's safe." Dogspot spoke quickly, her voice quiet. She was trying to be comforting, Burnttail realized. Just as she had when she was alive. "You'll meet her again soon, I'm sure. But not now. There are a few other cats who would like to talk to you first."

Burnttail blinked and looked around, but then let out a shocked gasp when he saw Smokedream, Lightskip, and Fawnwhisper approach him quickly. The three cats looked younger and stronger than they had when Burnttail last saw them. They looked at him warmly, their pelts shining like ice and frost sparkling at their paws.

"Burnttail, we've all been watching over you since we've joined StarClan." Smokedream meowed, his voice soft. "You know, we were all upset when you left ShadowClan. Bumblestar hadn't really told us why you did, and none of us understood why. But I do now, and a part of me is glad you did. You were a great deputy, and you saved RiverClan from Spottedfur. You saved *all* the Clans from her."

Burnttail's pelt prickled and he gave his chest fur a few embarrassed licks. He didn't like being praised. He didn't think he did anything extraordinary. "Yes, but... I left ShadowClan. The Clan that took me in and cared for me. Aren't you, well... mad?"

"Home isn't a place, Burnttail." Fawnwhisper murmured, taking a step forward. "It's a feeling. Being born in a certain Clan, or being taken in by one, doesn't mean that you must stay there. You're not bound to one place just because you grew up there. If you're not happy there and don't fit in, then you're free to leave. There's no use in staying a place that only wears you out and drags you down."

"She's right, you know." Lightskip dipped her head to her former

Clanmate.

Burnttail stared at them in surprise before letting out a purr. His heart warmed with joy and gratitude. "Thank you all."

A surprised shriek made him flinch, and before he could move, he spotted Frecklestar sprint past him in a blur of brown-and-cream. He looked after her as his heart calmed down, and purred when he realized she was approaching a group of cats he didn't quite recognize. Former Clanmates, he realized when he spotted Whitewhisker among them, the gray-and-white tom standing tall in front of her. He looked healthy and strong again.

Next to Whitewhisker he spotted a brown tom with dark ginger markings, his tabby tail swishing as he blinked at her warmly. Burnttail squinted his eyes, and despite never meeting the tom, he guessed that it was most likely Aspenfeather, an elder who had died moons before he joined RiverClan.

Movement caught his eye and he blinked a few times before looking at the approaching cat. A dark ginger she-cat with lighter paws, muzzle, and belly padded toward him, her brown stripes shimmering on her pelt as she purred.

Burnttail flinched back, his eyes widening with shock. It felt like he was looking in a puddle, in a way. Not really, but he thought he knew who the she-cat was. Despite carrying all the scents of the season, there was a faint, milk scent on her, and Burnttail picked it up immediately. "Are you...?"

Emotion flickered in the she-cat's green eyes as she nodded. "I'm your mother, Burnttail." She purred, and Burnttail couldn't help but wince with shock, despite her warm tone. "My name is Vixen. I'm sorry that I had to leave you, my son, but I am grateful to ShadowClan for taking such good care of you, and to RiverClan for accepting you as one of their own when you joined them. Have you ever wondered what happened to me?"

"I have." Burnttail nodded, feeling breathless. He didn't know how to react. He knew he was standing in front of his mother, but he was too young to remember her by the time he joined ShadowClan.

He shifted his weight, feeling awkward.

Vixen nodded, gazing at him warmly. Her eyes betrayed flickered with the love of a mother who longed for things to have played out differently. "We lived by the barn, you know. Near WindClan territory. But I knew about the Clans, and wanted to join them in hopes that it would mean you grew up in a safer environment. I knew a... ShadowClan cat once, a long time ago, so I decided to take you in there, hoping that I could find her again. I made a nest for us and waited to be found by a patrol, but I caught a fox scent. I didn't want to risk anything, so I left to find the fox and drive it away from you. But... it killed me." Her voice cracked with emotion. "I'm so sorry, Burnttail. But I'm glad that I managed to protect you, and even more grateful that a ShadowClan patrol found you rather quickly."

Burnttail stiffened, shocked by the new revelation. His shoulders slumped with pity, and he briefly wondered what his life would have been like if his mother had joined ShadowClan with him. *No point in dwelling over that now*, he mused as he pushed the thought away. He nodded slowly. "It's... all right. I'm just glad that I got to meet you. But... what about my father? Is he here, too?"

Vixen shook her head, her eyes narrowing slightly. "No. You know, StarClan allowed me to join them because they wanted to give me a chance to watch over you and meet you, and I believed in them already. Your father, however... he's still alive, but I'm not sure if he'll join us once he passes. He doesn't care about the Clans, and didn't want to join me when I asked him to come with us to ShadowClan. He stayed at the barn, refusing to give up on his life as a loner."

Burnttail frowned, his heart twisting in his chest. *My father just... left Vixen alone? He must not have cared too much about her or me, then.* Grief tugged at his heart, but he pushed it away quickly. He never met his father anyway, he thought. It didn't matter. If he lived his entire life without him, then he could manage to do the same in the afterlife. *And I've already got plenty of cats who care about me. I'll be all right.*

A tiny shape moved next to Vixen's paws. Burnttail blinked as he

lowered his gaze and gasped when he spotted the kit. She was a small, ginger-brown she-kit with black splotches. She was looking up at her with bright, wide amber eyes, her pure black tail swishing excitedly.

He recognized the kit. He never met her, but his memories carried him back to many moons ago, back when he was still a kit. He'd heard Sootblossom speak of her once, when he was no bigger than her.

"You're... you're Scorpionkit, aren't you? Snake's sister?" Burnttail breathed out, surprised to see her.

Scorpionkit nodded, her ears twitching with joy, as if she was glad to be recognized. "That's right!" She piped up as she sat back on her haunches. "I wish that I could've been there for Snake, but she had you. She was all right. You know, you were her brother, Burnttail."

Burnttail winced as the old feeling of guilt resurfaced in his heart again. "Maybe, but... she left ShadowClan because of that argument between us. That *I* caused. And I know, it wasn't my fault that she left, but-"

"I know." Scorpionkit interrupted him quickly. "I think I understand. But it's not your fault. And trust me, I know." She purred amusedly as she batted at a red butterfly that flew past her. "I think you'll meet her again one day, and she'll explain everything. I'm sure of it."

Burnttail blinked in surprise, but he nodded. He didn't fully believe the kit's words, but he wanted to. "Thank you, Scorpionkit."

"All right, it's my turn now." A gruff voice murmured as the kit nodded and rushed away to chase the butterfly.

Burnttail looked toward the sound and gasped when he saw a ginger-brown she-cat approach him with welcoming eyes. His eyes widened with disbelief when he recognized the she-cat. "Brokenflower? But... what are you doing here? You're still alive, aren't you?"

Brokenflower shook her head sadly. "I died a few days ago, Burnttail. In my sleep. Quite an underwhelming death for an old she-cat like me, don't you think?" She purred with amusement before she grew serious again. "But that's not why I came to talk to you."

Burnttail blinked in confusion as he looked at the she-cat, but he gaped when he realized that the elder was standing on all of her four paws now. She wasn't missing a leg anymore.

"Your.. your leg isn't missing anymore..." Burnttail whispered, taken aback.

"That's right." Brokenflower nodded as she shifted her weight. "You can choose if you want to keep your scars or not here, in StarClan. And that's why I came here. So, Burnttail, do you wish for me to heal your scars?"

Burnttail blinked as he thought about all of his three scars: the one on his shoulder, the one on his flank, and the one over his eye. He'd earned all of them from his reckless trespasses into ThunderClan's territory, back when he was an angry and stubborn apprentice. The scars that had caused his argument with Snake, but also led to him joining RiverClan. Those scars held memories and whispers of his entire life. And his ear had been torn by Spottedfur during their fight. He didn't want any of his scars to be healed or fade away. He wanted to remember his entire life and all of his mistakes, but also his more glorious moments.

He felt proud of his scars. He wasn't embarrassed of them in the slightest. Why should he, after all? *These scars represent who I am and all of the things I've done, whether good or bad.*

He looked back at Brokenflower and shook his head. "No, thank you. I'm all right. These scars show who I am, and, in a way, they represent my journey in life. My scars came from being a reckless ShadowClan apprentice that led to me joining RiverClan. I met wonderful cats there, and stopped Spottedfur's wicked plans, who... also tore my ear, of course. I'm still upset about that." He purred softly. "They will always echo and whisper stories from my life. I'm proud of all of my scars, even the ones I've earned by being careless

and stubborn."

"That's my friend!" Dogspot piped up excitedly and nudged Burnttail gently, her eyes flickering at him playfully. "Never be ashamed of your scars, you big hero!"

Burnttail purred in amusement at her, nudging her back gently.

Brokenflower dipped her head, her eyes flickering in thought. Was that respect in her eyes? "A wise choice. I respect your decision, Burnttail. You're a wise cat, you know. Not many cats would be proud of their scars."

Burnttail's heart swelled with pride at her words. He dipped his head respectfully, but tensed when memories of RiverClan flashed through his mind. He could see his Clanmates staring down at him by the edge of the gorge again, wailing after him as he fell...

"Frecklestar!" He yowled out to his leader, who was still talking to a few other cats further away from him. "We forgot about RiverClan! They don't have a leader anymore!"

Frecklestar whirled around instantly, as if she had been struck. She ran toward him immediately, her paws barely touching the ground as her eyes widened with shock and fear. "Oh, StarClan!"

"And that's why we want you to choose the next leader."

Burnttail turned his head and blinked in shock when he saw Troutpatch approach him. The former RiverClan deputy looked young again, his eyes flashing with joy and gratitude as he dipped his head. He stopped in front of him and stood tall, blinking slowly at him as he flicked his dappled tail. "Thank you for everything, Burnttail. You've done more than enough for RiverClan, and you've given up your life for them. You've saved them from a monster. Which is why I believe that you're the most fit cat to choose their new leader." He spoke proudly, his voice quiet.

"Me?" Burnttail flinched back in shock, his heart beating wildly in his chest. "But... I've only joined StarClan moments ago! I don't even know who to choose! Are you sure you shouldn't choose a better cat

for this?"

"There is no cat better fit for this, believe me. And trust me, you know exactly who the best cat to lead RiverClan is." Troutpatch meowed and stepped toward him, touching Burnttail's forehead with his nose.

Burnttail shuddered as cold air rushed through him, but he felt his muscles relax under the former deputy's nose. His racing mind calmed down, and his shoulders relaxed.

Troutpatch took a few steps back and nodded warmly at him. "Now come on, go ahead. Briarpond and RiverClan are waiting."

"And we'll be waiting for you to come back, too!" Dogspot purred as she approached him, gazing at him proudly. She nudged him playfully, her eyes flickering with longing.

"It will be great to catch up again." Spiderfrost murmured as she joined Dogspot, blinking slowly at him as his tail swished.

They'd missed him, too. Just as much as he had missed them.

His heart melted.

Burnttail stared at them, then at Troutpatch and back at them. He purred. He felt warm with joy, as if the newleaf sun had rested its light protectively and comfortingly over his back after a long and cold leafbare. He looked toward Frecklestar, and the leader dipped her head at him approvingly, purring.

She already knew who he would choose.

Burnttail dipped his head toward his friends happily. *They'll wait for me. I'll be back soon.* He promised before his paws carried him away quickly, almost as if they had a mind of their own. He ran through StarClan's territory quickly and freely, breathing in the warm and welcoming scents, his fur blowing softly in the gentle wind. His paws skipped over the soft grass lightly, and as he closed his eyes, he could see a pair of green eyes blinking back at him slowly.

He'd made his choice.

Chapter 29

Rain poured around Briarpond, plastering her fur to her body as she padded inside her den, her shoulders slumped with worry. The patrol who had left to help chase away a few rogues had just returned moments ago, and Briarpond had immediately realized that something was wrong just by the way the cats looked. They managed to fend off the rogues, but not without losses.

Frecklestar and Burnttail had both fallen in the gorge.

RiverClan was leaderless.

The rain wasn't loud enough to cover her Clanmates' wails, mourning their deceased leader and deputy. Briarpond shut her eyes tight as she collapsed on her nest, exhausted. She tried to tune out the cries as she struggled to fall asleep. She had no time nor energy to travel to the Moonstone; she needed help now. She hoped StarClan would visit her in her dreams, even if she was back in her camp, as they had sometimes done in the past. *Please, StarClan, I really need your help now.*

Only a few moments passed when a warm breeze ruffled Briarpond's fur. She opened her eyes and gaped when she found herself in a lush forest that carried the scent of newleaf. The rain was gone, instead replaced by chirping birds and a clear, blue sky with fluffy clouds drifting peacefully overhead. She heard the sound of a gentle river somewhere in the distance. In an instant, she looked around, squinting her eyes. *I'm in StarClan, right? Please, where...*

"You finally came."

Briarpond spun around and let out a shocked gasp when she saw Burnttail approach her. She let out a sigh of relief. The former RiverClan deputy looked a little younger than he had when she last

saw him, but his three scars hadn't faded, nor had his torn ear. His pelt glowed softly with a strange light that made it look like he had stars in his fur. He blinked warmly at her, his amber eyes shining like stars. He carried the scents of all four seasons with him. And, most importantly, he looked happy. He wasn't injured.

The medicine cat lowered her head in shame. "Burnttail, I... I'm so sorry for your death. And... and Frecklestar's. I should've been there to save you."

Burnttail blinked, looking taken aback, before he purred quietly. "Briarpond, there was nothing you could've done." He spoke softly. "We both fell in the gorge. No cat could've saved us. It's not your fault."

Briarpond flinched at the words. He was right. The patrol hadn't even managed to find their bodies yet. *And they probably won't,* she realized with horror. They couldn't even grieve the two lost cats properly. Her stomach twisted with nausea. "I... suppose."

Burnttail seemed to notice her unease, because he stepped a little closer. "Even without our bodies, you will still be able to grieve for us properly. Don't worry, our bodies may be gone, but we aren't. The memories will remain." He touched Briarpond's forehead with his nose lightly, and she shuddered before he took a step back again. "Either way, I think you already know why I came here, right?'"

Briarpond nodded slowly. "I think so."

Burnttail nodded, and when Briarpond blinked, he was gone. Her heart dropped and she was about to call for him when she realized that her surroundings were beginning to change, the lush forest morphing into a different place around her. Dizzy, she shut her eyes tight and dug her claws into the ground.

After a few more heartbeats, she opened her eyes again, but frowned when she realized she was sitting on a rock not far from RiverClan's camp. Assuming she was still dreaming, she squinted her eyes and gasped when she noticed a very tall, bright ginger tree standing tall in the middle of the camp, its roots firmly embedded

in the ground. Its branches reached high into the sky, even higher than any other tree in their territory, with soft shadows cast over the camp. *The tree is protecting our camp!* She realized with a start.

Briarpond flinched when she heard a loud shriek coming from overhead. She lifted her head and froze when she saw multiple eagles flying in the camp's direction, staring directly at it, their eyes narrowed with malice. The medicine cat stood frozen, fighting against the instinct to rush into the camp and make sure that Berryfeather's kits were safe. *This is just a dream,* she reminded herself, despite her thoughts racing and her heart beating wildly in her chest.

As soon as the eagles were about to swoop into the camp, the ginger tree suddenly lit itself on fire. Briarpond flinched back, her eyes widening as she stared at the glowing fire wrapping and dancing around the bark. The tree burned down quickly until nothing more than ashes remained, but nothing else had caught on fire. But the eagles seemed to have had enough: they hovered above the burning tree until it turned into ashes, and they let out terrified shrieks before flying away as quickly as they came.

Briarpond looked after them in surprise before the sound of paw steps startled her. She jumped up with a start, but relaxed when she noticed that Burnttail was now standing next to her. He was looking after the eagles, then back at the medicine cat, his amber eyes shining softly. "You know what to do next, Briarpond."

Burnttail nodded slowly. The sign made sense to her, but... what if he was wrong? "But she's so young... are you sure that she's ready?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Burnttail nodded, his gray tail flicking slightly. "I was her mentor, and I know her better than most other cats. She's very energetic, kind, and willing to give up her life for her Clan. She will be a great leader for RiverClan, I'm sure, and she will have an even greater medicine cat to guide her paw steps." He purred in amusement, before his tone turned serious again. "It's time to go now, don't forget what I've shown you. And don't worry. Everything will be all right."

Briarpond hesitated, wanting to ask him more questions, but before

she could, she found her eyes closing on their own. When she opened her eyes again, she was back in her nest. Frustration ebbed in her chest, wishing she had the chance to ask more questions, but she got up and shook out her fur. *If StarClan chose her, then who am I to doubt their decision?*

She sprinted out of her den excitedly, but her heart twisted with grief when she saw her Clanmates sitting in a ragged circle by the camp entrance, clearly still grieving for their dead leader and deputy. Briarpond took a deep breath before she jumped on the Wetrock, her paws almost slipping off before she quickly regained her balance. "Let all cats old enough to swim the currents gather beneath the Wetrock for a Clan meeting!" She yowled, struggling to sound louder than the pouring rain.

The other cats turned around, clearly surprised to see their medicine cat standing on the Wetrock. Tornfeather stepped forward, his ears lowering with confusion. "Briarpond? What are you doing?"

"Sit down and you'll find out, Tornfeather." Briarpond meowed, resting her tail on her front paws.

The elder stared at her for a few more moments before rolling his eyes and stepping back into the crowd. When all the other cats gathered around, confused and grieving, Briarpond took a deep breath before she spoke. "I know that you're all confused, scared, and grieving, but we're going to be all right. After I found out the news, I went to my den and fell asleep in hopes that StarClan would visit me in my dreams, and they did. Burnttail gave me a clear sign, and he has chosen who our next leader will be. I trust that he, and StarClan, are right."

The other cats started whispering to each other curiously, but they fell quiet quickly. A single ray of sunlight filtered through the storm clouds and rested gently over the gathered cats, a silent promise of hope. Briarpond looked around for a specific cat, and purred when she saw her green eyes blinking back at her. "Acaciaspark, step forward."

Shocked gasps erupted from the crowd as the young ginger she-cat

flinched. "What? Me?"

"The sign was clear enough." Briarpond nodded, purring with sympathy. "I found myself sitting outside our camp, and I saw a tall ginger tree standing in the centre of our camp, and it lit itself on fire as soon as danger was approaching our camp. The fire and its ash sent the intruders away. I know that you're young, Acaciaspark, but if Burnttail thinks that you're ready, and if StarClan has chosen you, then they must know what they're doing. And I trust they're right." She sighed softly. "Come, address your Clan from your rightful place."

Acaciaspark's siblings crowded around her in an instant, murmuring their congratulations with barely-hidden excitement and joy. *And maybe with a little envy, too,* Briarpond thought with amusement as the she-cat nodded quickly at them, looking taken aback by the news.

Briarpond jumped off the Wetrock and sat down by the shallow stream that surrounded it, feeling proud, but at the same time anxious. She watched as Acaciaspark fought against her shock as she jumped on the Wetrock and looked around with narrowed, uncertain eyes. The medicine cat blinked sympathetically at her new leader. *She's so scared.* She felt pity for her. Acaciaspark was young, and she wasn't entirely sure why StarClan hadn't chosen an older, more experienced cat instead. *But maybe they know something we don't? Maybe something is coming, and only Acaciaspark will be able to guide us through it? Either way, I trust StarClan's judgment. They must be right. And I trust that Acaciaspark will get through this. She's young and strong. And I'll do my best to help her through her worries.*

After a few more heartbeats, Acaciaspark began speaking, her voice quiet. "I personally don't think that I'm ready to lead RiverClan, but if StarClan thinks otherwise, then I won't question their choice. I promise to try my best and be a good, wise leader, and I hope to be even half as great as Frecklestar was, and as Burnttail could've been." Her voice cracked lightly. "You won't be disappointed, I promise. But... I'll need help. *All* of your help. Please, guide me forward and help me with decisions. Don't hesitate to speak out your concerns and ideas."

When the gathered cats murmured in agreement and nodded sympathetically, Acaciaspark continued speaking, looking a little more confident. "Thank you. I must go to the Moonstone to receive my nine lives soon, but before that, I must appoint a new deputy."

Briarpond dipped her head in agreement to the new leader's words. She tried to follow Acaciaspark's gaze as it sweeped over the gathered cats, but she wasn't sure who she would choose. The she-cat blinked anxiously at the gathered cats before letting out a relieved sigh. "Whitealder. You've been a very loyal and kind cat, and you're one of the strongest warriors we have. You've never hesitated before when it came to defending our Clan. Do you accept to be RiverClan's new deputy?"

Briarpond blinked slowly as she looked at the white-and-ginger tom, frowning slightly. Whitealder was Acaciaspark's father, wasn't this a sign of favoritism? *Acaciaspark is young,* she told herself quickly. *And it's not a terrible choice. Whitealder is an experienced and dedicated warrior. He will be a great deputy.*

The tom's blue eyes widened with surprise, but he nodded slowly toward his daughter. "I'm honored to be chosen. I do, Acaciaspark."

Acaciaspark dipped her head, looking relieved and pleased. "Then, I say these words before the spirits of Frecklestar and Burnttail, that our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice." Her voice wavered at the mention of the deceased cats. "The new deputy of RiverClan will be Whitealder!"

The other cats let out murmurs of agreement and cheers. Acaciaspark hesitated, unsure of what to do next, but then dipped her head. "Meeting dismissed." She meowed, then jumped off the Wetrock and looked at Briarpond, confused. "We have to go to the Moonstone now, right?"

Briarpond nodded to her new leader, purring with amusement. "That's right. By the way, you're doing great. You spoke all of the words so naturally... Burnttail was right when he chose you. I'm sure that you will be a great leader. Don't worry." She murmured reassuringly.

Acaciaspark nodded slowly, her green eyes shining softly through the rain, which had thankfully softened. "Thank you, Briarpond. Should we head out now?"

Briarpond looked at the sky, squinting her eyes. Despite it still raining, she could tell by the darkening sky that the sun was about to set. "Yes, but we should hurry now. Let's go!"

The rain had stopped and the moon was already rising slowly by the time Briarpond and Acaciaspark had reached the Highstones. They quickly crossed the Thunderpath together, their paws barely touching the hard surface as Briarpond looked up. The tall, familiar jagged peaks were stretching high toward the sky, fading into nothing more than shadows against the starlit sky. She looked around until she spotted the cave entrance, which was a black hole that yawned darkly beneath a stone archway. *Mothermouth.* She padded toward it and looked past her shoulder. "Follow me, Acaciaspark. But I have to warn you that it will be very dark inside. Just follow my scent, all right? I know the way to the Moonstone."

Acaciaspark nodded, but the moon was illuminating her face just enough that Briarpond could see her frown and narrowed, uncertain eyes. "Yes, Briarpond."

"You'll be all right." Briarpond purred reassuringly before she turned around and headed into the cave. The light faded away gradually until she was plunged into darkness, but she felt calm. She had made this journey so many times that she was certain she could find the Moonstone with her eyes closed. Once they were getting closer, she perked her ears to listen for paw steps. "Acaciaspark? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here." Acaciaspark's meow echoed around the cave, her tone sounding both nervous and excited.

Briarpond let out a relieved sigh, then looked ahead again. After a few more heartbeats, she spotted a very bright light ahead of them, as if waiting as she rushed forward and emerged from the dark tunnel. Acaciaspark followed her instantly and halted beside her, letting out a shocked gasp.

They were now standing in a very bright cavern that was arching high above them, with an opening in the roof that revealed a narrow triangle of the sky. The moon was drifting peacefully right above them, illuminating the cavern and the gleaming Moonstone, making it sparkle like a star. Briarpond let out a purr. *We arrived on time.*

She turned around to look at Acaciaspark and purred in amusement when she saw the she-cat's eyes wide with shock and fear. She nudged her lightly. "Don't be scared, Acaciaspark. It's all right. Now, come on, go ahead and touch your nose to the Moonstone. I'll be right behind you."

Acaciaspark hesitated, then nodded, clearly at a loss for words. Briarpond watched as she approached the Moonstone and lay down, her ginger fur looking white in the Moonstone's bright glow. The new leader touched her nose to the Moonstone before she fell still. After a few more heartbeats, Briarpond took a deep breath as she approached the Moonstone. She blinked slowly at the glowing stone before she lay down next to Acaciaspark. She touched her nose to the Moonstone and shut her eyes tight as she felt herself drifting off.

When Briarpond opened her eyes, she found herself in a green meadow that carried the scent of greenleaf. The clear, blue sky stretched high above her with a few fluffy clouds passing by slowly. The warm breeze ruffled her fur as she took a deep breath and looked around, feeling her worries melting under the gentle sun. *I'll always be amazed by StarClan's territory.*

She looked around, squinting her eyes before gaping. About half a tree-length away, in the distance, she recognized Acaciaspark's ginger fur puffing out with amusement. She gasped when she saw nine glowing forms approaching her. In an instant, she sat back on her haunches in an attempt to see the scene better. *Acaicaspark is getting her nine lives!*

Her heart leapt with joy when she recognized the cats greeting her new leader. She spotted Frecklestar's brown-and-cream form in the centre, looking younger and stronger than she had in moons. Burnttail stood near her, his head held high as he was flanked by Spiderfrost and Dogspot, the two cats blinking warmly at

Acaciaspark as they purred in amusement to one another. *They look so happy.* Her heart broke when she remembered the cause of their deaths: Spottedfur. *What an evil she-cat, plotting the deaths of her Clanmates out of her fear and hate for ShadowClan... I hope she isn't here.*

Near them stood Troutpatch, the deputy before Burnttail. Briarpond purred when she saw him. *It's so good to see him! He would've made a fine leader.*

Behind him waited Aspenfeather and Whitewhisker, two elders who had died a long time ago. *Especially Aspenfeather,* Briarpond thought as she looked at the brown tom with dark ginger markings. *It's good to see him again.* They both looked younger and stronger again, and sure on their paws as they waited for their turn.

Briarpond gasped when she saw a tall, long-furred dark gray tabby tom step forward. He fluffed out his fur as his white belly and paws seemed to glow brighter than the rest of his fur, his green eyes shining warmly at Acaciaspark. He had died a few moons before Briarpond was born, but she was sure that she was looking at Thistlestar, the leader before Frecklestar. *I've only heard stories about him, but the other cats say that he was a fine and noble leader. I'm glad that he's still watching over us and approves of this new choice.*

Briarpond nearly jumped out of her fur when a very familiar black-and-silver tabby she-cat stepped forward, murmuring something to Thistlestar before greeting Acaciaspark warmly. The she-cat had died many moons ago, but she wasn't forgotten. None of them were.

And Briarpond could never forget her mentor.

Lilacheart! Briarpond wanted to yell for her former mentor, but she struggled to stay silent. This was Acaciaspark's nine lives ceremony, she couldn't interrupt it. She watched in awe as her mentor murmured something to the new leader before touching her nose to the she-cat's forehead. Briarpond's heart seemed to twist and struggle in her chest, begging her to run to her mentor, but she fought with herself to stay still.

Lilacheart then took a step forward and blinked slowly at

Acaciaspark. Then, she glowed a little brighter, and when Briarpond blinked, she was gone.

Confusion and panic settled in her chest, and she tensed as she frantically looked around for her mentor. *What? Where did she go? This isn't how this is supposed to go! StarClan cats don't fade away after they give a new leader a life!*

She thought she saw Acaciaspark flinch back with shock, but Thistlestar approached her quickly. But Briarpond didn't care. She kept frantically looking around for her mentor, her stomach twisting with dread. Her fur stood on end. *Where is she? Where did she go?*

"Briarpond."

Briarpond spun around and let out a gasp when she saw Lilacheart. Her shoulders slumped with relief and she sighed with gratitude, her heart finally calming down in her chest. *She's okay.* Her former mentor looked a little younger, and the fatal wounds she'd received from the battle that killed her were gone. Her fur was shining healthily. The medicine cat purred and approached her with awe, unsure of what to say. So much time has passed... "Lilacheart, I-"

"I know what you're going to say." Lilacheart interrupted her gently, flicking her tabby tail. "You're going to say that you wish you could've saved me. But there wasn't anything you could've done, believe me. That rogue attacked me before either of us could react, and the injuries he gave me were fatal. I lost too much blood too quickly. But thankfully Troutpatch jumped in and chased away the rogue before you suffered the same fate I did. It's not your fault, don't worry. You're a great medicine cat."

Briarpond's heart lit up with relief and pride, but she still felt doubt lingering in her chest. "Am I?" She murmured. "Both Frecklestar and Burntail are dead. Surely there must have been something that I could have done to save them!"

Lilacheart let out a sigh. "No, Briarpond. Burnttail already told you this. There was nothing you, or any other cat, could have done. They fell in the gorge. No cat could have saved them. And besides,

they're safe in StarClan now, and RiverClan has a new leader. You chose wisely, Briarpond."

"I know, but that's what Burnttail told me to do." Briarpond blinked, feeling confused. "I didn't choose Acaciaspark by myself. StarClan did. I just did what Burnttail showed me to."

"Exactly." Lilacheart nodded slowly, her eyes warm with pride. "You trusted StarClan's judgment, despite not being too sure of it at first. Some medicine cats do the opposite of what they're supposed to, but you didn't. You trusted us. I'm proud of you, Briarpond, and you're a great medicine cat. Don't worry about it. I left RiverClan in safe paws."

Briarpond sighed in relief, beaming with joy from the praise. But her heart was still twisting restlessly in her chest, even just a little. "Thank you, Lilacheart, really. But... I miss you."

Her former mentor nodded, her eyes shining with regret and longing. "I miss you, too, Briarpond. But it's all right, see? RiverClan is safe in your paws, and there will be many moons to come before you join StarClan. We will see each other again soon, don't worry. I'll guide your paw steps until you join me. But before that, RiverClan needs you." She cast a glance past her shoulder before speaking again. "You should go now. Acaciaspark will be waiting for you."

Briarpond blinked in surprise. "Already?"

Lilacheart nodded and purred warmly. She then took a step forward and touched her nose to Briarpond's forehead. She shuddered as cold air rushed through her fur, squeezing her eyes shut. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself back by the Moonstone. She got up and took a few steps back, shaking out her fur as she sat down.

Acaciaspark was still sleeping, and the Moonstone glowed more faintly now. The moon was close to setting. *We should go back soon.*

After a few more heartbeats, one of Acaciaspark's cream paws twitched. Then her tail. Briarpond leaned forward and sighed in

relief when she saw the leader's green eyes blink open. She got up slowly and looked back at the medicine cat, her eyes narrowed with disorientation. But there was a slight hint of joy in her eyes, too. She was happy. *She was accepted by StarClan.*

Emotion flickered in the new leader's green eyes as she waited for the medicine cat to speak. Briarpond purred with joy. *StarClan has given her their blessing. RiverClan will be all right. And we're both still needed back at camp. We will make them proud.* "Welcome back, Acaciastar."

The she-cat nodded slowly, her cream tail tip twitching with excitement. She seemed eager to get back to camp. "Thank you, Briarpond. Now come on! Let's go back to RiverClan. Our Clan is waiting for us."

Epilogue

The warm greenleaf sun shone gently over the forest as Burnttail floated toward the ground, his paws tingling as they landed softly on the grass. A few moons passed since his death, and despite growing used to being a StarClan cat, he missed his Clanmates dearly.

He spent most of his time with Dogspot and Spiderfrost, catching up and trying to get back the time that had been ripped away by Spottedfur. He hadn't seen her again, and he was glad not to. *She's rotting in the Dark Forest where she belongs.*

As a StarClan cat, Burnttail grew curious, and a little nosy, about life back in the forest, so he spent a lot of time visiting RiverClan to check on his former Clanmates, and sometimes he checked on ShadowClan, too. Goosepath had recently died in his sleep and joined StarClan, and even if he and Burnttail hadn't seen eye to eye in the past, they were both glad to have seen each other again. And thankfully, RiverClan was thriving.

ShadowClan seemed to be thriving, too, even without Burnttail, he realized with a pang. But he wasn't upset; he accepted it a long time ago. *They'll be all right. They always have been, after all. And ShadowClan isn't my Clan anymore, it hasn't been for a long time. RiverClan is.* But he still had cats he cared about there, so he sometimes checked on them, too. Oakgaze had died not too long ago, and even though the two toms had hardly interacted, Burnttail was glad to see him again, healthier and stronger in StarClan. But he had recently found out that Bumblestar was on his last life, and by his graying muzzle, it was clear that he didn't have much time left. Burnttail's heart panged at the thought. *But ShadowClan will be all right. And hopefully, we can talk again in StarClan and make peace with one another.* He knew that the ShadowClan leader had never truly made peace with him joining RiverClan. *Hopefully I can get him to understand. But if not? That's all right. He doesn't have to. I don't regret a thing.*

Sootblossom had retired to the elders' den too, and Burnttail felt sick when he saw his adoptive father stumble or forget his words. But, thankfully, ShadowClan supported and helped him, and so did Ebonyheart and their kits. He remembered sadly that the two older cats hadn't quite been the same since they found out Burnttail died. *They didn't even get to say goodbye.* His stomach twisted. *I'm sorry.*

But they'll be all right, surely. We'll all see each other again soon.

Despite having gotten over his anger toward ThunderClan and Jaggedriver long ago, he couldn't help but sometimes check on their Clan, too. Snailstar, their leader, and Waspspark, their medicine cat, had been killed by dogs recently, and not too long after, Blazesong had died after slipping out of a tree. Burnttail kept a respectful distance from them in StarClan - mostly due to his past trespasses into their territory as an apprentice - but he sometimes talked to Blazesong and even laughed together at the past.

He also sometimes tried looking around the territories for Snake, but his shoulders slumped and his heart twisted painfully every time he found nothing. It seemed as if Snake had disappeared, and he wasn't sure where she would be. All he could hope for was that she was at peace.

He didn't care too much about WindClan, but Dogspot seemed to know everything that happened both in StarClan and in the forest and brought all of the gossip back to him and Spiderfrost. That way, he'd learned that Bearstar had become a shell of his former self, and spent most of his time in his den, so Plumbreeze, their deputy, took over most of his duties. He wasn't too sure what happened, but he heard some of the other StarClan cats mention something about the death of one of their elders, Flowerwing. Burnttail had seen her in StarClan, but didn't dare approach her to ask. *It's not my business, after all. I shouldn't be too nosy.*

Life was moving on, even without Burnttail. The Clans were thriving.

But he still missed RiverClan. And now, he wanted to visit them again and make sure that his Clanmates were all right.

He sighed softly as he felt the warm grass tingle his paws before looking around the familiar RiverClan's territory, memories flashing through his head. Leaving ShadowClan to join them, becoming a trusted warrior, training an apprentice, making friends, becoming deputy... it all seemed like it happened such a long time ago, despite the fact that he'd only been a StarClan cat for a few moons. He missed his Clanmates, he really did. *But they'll be okay.*

He headed toward the RiverClan camp, still remembering the way perfectly. Birds chirped joyfully around him as he walked, his paws leaving behind starry paw prints on the soft grass that faded away into the air gently.

He pricked his ears when he heard the voices of his former Clanmates, and purred with joy when he recognized the camp ahead of him. It looked just as it had when he was alive. *As if nothing changed.*

He jumped gracefully over the river that surrounded the camp and peered through the surrounding reeds, sniffling quietly when they tickled his nose. He purred at the sight.

RiverClan was still thriving, he was sure of it now.

Whitealder was sitting by the Wetrock, organizing the afternoon patrols. Burnttail watched as he called Swiftbrook, Bouldershade, and Sweetpetal forward before looking over at Nettlebrook. Burnttail let his gaze wander and spotted Acaciastar speaking to Briarpond in hushed tones by the medicine cat's den.

Berryfeather's kits, who were four moons old now, were playing with each other in the centre of the camp, hissing playfully at one another. Burnttail watched, amused, as Shadekit pounced on Dandelionkit before Flamekit jumped on both of them as the kits rolled away and sent dust flying in the air. Berryfeather rushed over to them in an instant, scolding them gently.

They're all right.

Burnttail let his gaze wander over the camp for a few more heartbeats before looking away, his heart panging with grief at the

thought of having to leave again. He hated the fact that RiverClan had very few warriors now. *And it's all because of that Spottedfur,* he hissed to himself before quickly pushing the thought away. I*t doesn't matter anymore, it's all right. Spottedfur is in the Dark Forest, she can't hurt anyone anymore. And RiverClan is okay, they're safe. They'll manage. And as for me...*

It was time to go back to StarClan.

His heart twisted with grief as he jumped back over the river, wishing he could go back to his life. But he couldn't. He took a deep breath as he reminded himself that he could still watch over them from StarClan. His time wasn't over yet.

He was about to let himself fade back to StarClan, but before he could, he saw a black tail tip disappear in a bush in front of him. He blinked and tilted his head, confused. Was there a rogue in RiverClan's territory, or a trespassing cat? He needed to know. He rushed into the bush and jumped out of it, shaking out his fur before halting suddenly, gaping with shock.

A tortoiseshell she-cat was standing in front of him, her pale amber eyes wide as she stared at him, fur fluffed up with alarm. It had been many moons since they had last seen each other, but she hadn't changed much.

Burnttail instantly recognized her.

Snake!

She had died many moons ago, but still looked the same as she always had. She looked strong and healthy, albeit shocked to see him. He realized that there was no frost sparkling at her paws, and her pelt didn't glow like a star. *She's not in StarClan... of course. Oh, Snake...*

Snake's ear twitched as she stared back at him, tail raised with alarm. No cat dared to say anything, they just stared at each other in silence for a few more heartbeats before the she-cat sighed and turned around, about to leave.

Panic surged through Burnttail as he took a step forward quickly. "Wait!" He called out desperately, his heart beating wildly in his chest. "Don't leave yet. Please!"

Snake froze. She stood still for a few more heartbeats before she turned around slowly to face him again, her ears lowered and shoulders slumped. "Hello... Burnttail."

Burnttail sighed in relief before tensing slightly. He felt awkward. He was glad to see her again, but it had been so long since they last spoke... what could he say? "Right, uh... hi, Snake."

The two cats stood in silence for a while before Burnttail let out a sigh and decided to break the silence. He was going to finally tell her what he'd wished he did long ago. *Here goes nothing.* "Listen, Snake, I'm... I'm *so* sorry for that argument, and I'm sorry for everything! I should have never went into ThunderClan's territory when I was an apprentice. That was a mistake. I was just... feeling *so* upset, and..."

Snake listened in silence, her eyes widening as she took a careful step forward. "No, no, it's all right! Don't apologize." She spoke softly before looking away in what looked like shame. "I understand. I was at fault, too. I was young and stupid, and I didn't think about your feelings at all back when we were in ShadowClan. I didn't try to understand at all. The truth is, I was worried for you and didn't want you to get hurt by being foolish, but... I was worse. The things I told you in that argument..." She visibly flinched as her eyes flickered with regret. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve any of that."

Burnttail stared at her with surprise. He took a deep breath as he relaxed slowly, feeling as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. She apologized. "It's all right, I understand. You felt hurt, too. We both clearly said things we didn't mean to. But... in the end, I still made you leave ShadowClan." His heart ached with grief when he remembered the day ShadowClan found out that Snake was leaving them. The look in her eyes... "That was my fault."

Snake blinked slowly at him before she broke into a loud purr of amusement, raising her paw and batting at the air as if dismissing

him.

Burnttail tensed, gritting his teeth in frustration as he felt embarrassment surge through him. "What's so funny?" He muttered as his fur spiked.

Snake shook her head in amusement as she looked at him, clearly struggling to stay serious. "Oh, Burnttail, I didn't leave because of you! Seriously!" She purred as her amusement finally faded away. "I met a rogue on our territory a few days after our argument. She was nice, and we became close friends. Her name was Amber, and I... well, I told her everything that happened, and she comforted me. And I just..." She took a deep breath. "I might've not looked like it, but I wished I could take back our argument. And I felt so lonely without you by my side. Not even our family could help me. I felt so guilty, but I just... didn't know what to say to you. So I avoided you instead... which was a stupid mistake." She sighed heavily as she blinked at him, her eyes shining softly with regret. "I'm so sorry. I wish I had the courage to apologize to you."

Burnttail nodded slowly as he processed the explanation. It made sense, after all. And who was he to judge? He had been hesitant to approach her, too, so he was no better. "I can't believe we were too scared to approach each other, so we just... avoided the other. All of that wasted time..." He sighed and hung his head in shame before blinking slowly at her. "But, I have to ask... did Amber tell you to leave ShadowClan?"

Snake nodded slowly before tensing, her tail tip twitching slightly. "Kind of." She murmured. "I just... really needed a cat I could talk to, and Amber was great and we got along and she listened. I know that I could've talked to Sootblossom or Ebonyheart instead, but they were mostly busy with Bluepatch, Breezesong, and Cloudpath, and I... oh, I was such a fox-heart!" She hissed to herself, but she continued speaking before Burnttail could interrupt her. "So I left with Amber and went to the barn. I missed being a ShadowClan cat, though, and I regretted our argument terribly. But, by that time... it was too late. There was nothing we could've done."

Burnttail's heart squeezed with sympathy. He hadn't been the only one to regret the argument. Snake did too. *Of course, she regretted it*

just as much as I did... oh, all of that lost time... He sighed as he nodded. "I see... I hope that you were happy, at least. I understand. But, I have to ask... how did you find out that I left ShadowClan for RiverClan?"

Snake brightened up immediately and her eyes shone mischievously. "Well, I was bored one night and realized that it was a Gathering night, so I decided to spy on the Clans." She purred with amusement. "So I went to Fourtrees, hid in the bushes, and watched. I saw you sitting by the RiverClan cats, and then I heard Frecklestar mention you as their newest warrior. I was shocked and didn't believe it, but Bumblestar didn't say anything, so I thought it must be true. Well, of course." She shook her head, as if embarrassed at herself. "But I wanted to see it for myself, so I went to look at RiverClan's camp the next day. And, well... I saw you. I was shocked, but I didn't know what to do so I left. I kept visiting the camp for a few more times though, but you didn't see me." She purred proudly. "You only saw me when I visited for the last time."

"Of course that's what happened." Burnttail shook his head with amusement, but his heart twisted at the last sentence. *When she visited for the last time...* he quickly pushed the thought away. "But why didn't you join RiverClan?"

Snake looked almost offended. "Me, a RiverClan cat? No way!" She stuck out her tongue playfully before sighing. "But, honestly... I didn't know what exactly to say to Frecklestar. Or to you. And..." She pawed the ground anxiously. "I didn't really want to leave Amber. I still thought about you, of course, but she was a good friend and I didn't want to leave her. I enjoyed her company, and didn't want to leave her alone at the barn."

Burnttail nodded slowly, his heart swelling with sympathy. He sighed softly, feeling lighter than he had in moons. "That's only fair. But..." He tilted his head as he looked over her fur that should've been glowing like a star. "I know you didn't go to StarClan. Obviously. I'm glad that you're okay, but... why? Why didn't you go to StarClan after you died?"

Snake frowned, her tail freezing in place as she lowered her head in shame to stare at her paws. "Well, I... I never really believed in

StarClan, honestly. It just sounded like nursery tales to me, and stopped thinking about them once I left ShadowClan. And since I died as a loner and not as a Clan cat, I went to their afterlife instead. I know StarClan exists now, but... I don't mind living in the loners' afterlife." She shrugged simply. "It's not that different from StarClan. And at least I can wait for Amber here."

Burnttail's heart dropped. "But maybe you can still join StarClan! Maybe the others will understand, and-"

Snake shook her head and interrupted him gently. "No, Burnttail. The afterlife is much more complicated than that. But I don't mind, seriously. I can wait for Amber here, I really miss her." She purred quietly before sighing. "And I could always visit StarClan. In a way, I'm living near the outskirts of their territory, so I'm not that far." She fell silent for a few heartbeats before sighing softly and blinking at him. "Either way... I'm really glad that we finally talked again. It was good to see you, but... I wish we had the chance to apologize to each other sooner."

Burnttail's shoulders slumped slightly, but he nodded in understanding before purring. "Me too." He murmured, and couldn't help but move forward to nuzzle his former friend. *It's been too long.* "I missed you so much, Snake. I'm sorry for everything." He whispered, his voice cracking with regret.

Snake tensed before sighing and leaning into him, purring quietly. "I'm sorry, too, Burnttail. And, listen... even if we're dead, can... can we still meet from time to time? I don't want us to forget about each other, and I really don't want to repeat the same mistake. I want you near me again."

Burnttail blinked in surprise before purring with relief. He took a few steps back and nodded, his heart soaring with joy. "Of course! I want you close again, too. I could leave StarClan to visit you sometimes, and we can catch up and talk?"

"And gossip." Snake purred mischeviously before sighing. "Just like old times. I'd really love that. And maybe I could sometimes visit you, too. I was a Clan cat once, after all. I *should* be able to visit StarClan." She murmured thoughtfully before nudging him

playfully. "We don't even have much to catch up on, anyway. I've been watching over you since I died. I was really happy when you became deputy, and... the way you confronted Spottedfur? You were so brave for that! I could've never!" She teased lightly, but there was a hint of seriousness and concern in her tone.

Burnttail winced from the memories, but he forced them out of his mind and purred. "Thanks, Snake. You know, I think you would've done *better* than me, actually." He joked lightly, before sighing thoughtfully. "But, I need to know... did Spottedfur really kill you? Or was I wrong?"

Snake frowned and turned serious again. "She did kill me. I stopped in RiverClan's territory for a quick drink, and she just... pounced on me out of nowhere. Held my head underwater." She shuddered before shaking her head quickly. "But before she killed me, she said that she wants all ShadowClan cats to suffer for what they did to her mother. She had this insane look in her eyes... She's crazy." She huffed as she bared her teeth. "She was an insane cat, I really don't know what was wrong with her. I'm glad she's gone."

Burnttail hissed quietly and he rested his tail over her back comfortingly, to which Snake responded by leaning into him slightly. "I'm... really sorry, Snake. But don't worry, Spottedfur is gone now. She's in the Dark Forest, where she belongs."

"Good." Snake hissed.

The two cats sat in silence for a while as the sky began darkening and stars began appearing slowly. Burnttail looked up at the sparkling stars before sighing and looking at his friend. "I should probably go back to StarClan now. Will you be all right?"

Snake blinked up at him, before she purred in amusement and nudged him away gently with her paw.

Burnttail twitched his ear, feeling a little irritated as he got up to face her, but he couldn't stay upset when he saw how happy the she-cat looked. His heart melted. *We're finally okay again.*

Snake struggled to stop purring before she spoke again. "Don't

worry about me, Burnttail! I'll be all right, seriously. I've been a ghost for longer than you have, after all. I have experience." She purred with amusement before blinking warmly at him. "Come on now, go back to StarClan. See you again soon?"

Burnttail nodded slowly as relief and gratitude washed over him. "See you soon."

Snake nodded and she held his gaze for a few more moments before she turned around and padded away, fading away slowly into the warm night air.

Burnttail took a deep breath before turning around and padding through RiverClan's territory for a while. He perked his ears as he heard the rivers murmuring gently all around him. He sighed before leaping up into the air, his paws and tail tingling as he floated back toward StarClan.

Snake was all right. They were okay again.

And Burnttail had never felt lighter and happier. He felt content with everything. Both with his mistakes and his accomplishments.

I've done a lot of mistakes in my life that I regret, but I've also done great things, too. I'm glad that Snake, Dogspot, and Spiderfrost are my friends. They truly are the greatest cats anyone could ask for! And I'm so glad my path crossed with Snake's again. It felt great to see her again and apologize to her. We're okay now, and we'll see each other again soon. As for Spottedfur... in a way, I'm glad I killed her. I saved RiverClan from her. She was an evil cat, but she's in the Dark Forest now, where she belongs. I'll still miss my Clanmates, but they'll be okay without me. Acaciastar is a great leader, and Whitealder is an even better deputy than I was! And now, with Spottedfur and that rogue group gone, RiverClan and all the other Clans are safe. They will be all right. They will continue to thrive. And I will watch over them from StarClan, and guide them when I can. Life will move on, but my time isn't over yet. I can finally relax properly, and so can my friends. We've all earned it.

Final Allegiances

RiverClan

Leader: **Acaciastar** - Ginger she-cat with a cream belly, paws and tail tip and green eyes

Deputy: **Whitealder** - Long-furred white tom with ginger dapples and blue eyes

Medicine cat: **Briarpond** - Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Warriors: **Swiftbrook** - Gray she-cat with long legs

Bouldershade - Black tom

Nettlebrook - Cream-and-white she-cat

Lavenderpurr - Long-furred white she-cat with ginger and black splotches

Sweetpetal - White she-cat with ginger-brown dapples and blue-green eyes

Grassfoot - Cream tabby tom with green eyes

Queens: **Berryfeather** - Pale ginger she-cat. Mother to Bouldershade's kits: Dandelionkit, a pale ginger she-kit with black splotches, Shadekit, a black tom, and Flamekit, a very pale ginger tom with darker ginger stripes and black paws

Elders: **Tornfeather** - Black tom with a short tail

ThunderClan

Leader: **Cloverstar** - Tan-and-silver she-cat with a white neck

Deputy: **Petalmist** - Pale cream-and-white she-cat with gray dapples

Medicine cat: **Eagleflight** - Brown tabby tom with white legs and a golden muzzle

Warriors: **Hazelfoot** - Brown tom with a white leg

Jaggedriver - Gray tabby tom with a black muzzle

Kestrelstrike - Mottled cream tom

Weaselfall - Ginger-and-white tom

Silentpetal - Gray-and-silver she-cat with a short tail

Mothpond - Brown-and-golden she-cat with blue eyes

Emberglare - Ginger tom with a white belly and dark amber eyes

Toadshade - Black tom with silver patches

Elders: **Rosemeadow** - Cream, white and brown she-cat with amber eyes

Snowthroat - White she-cat with green eyes

ShadowClan

Leader: **Bumblestar** - Yellow tom with black stripes and white paws

Deputy: **Frostedwillow** - Long-furred white she-cat with gray legs and tail

Medicine cat: **Flintdusk** - Black-and-gray tom

Warriors: **Needlerose** - Silver she-cat with gray stripes and white paws

Pigeonswoop - Gray-and-white tom

Pebblewhisper - Spotted gray tom

Stormfleck - Blue-gray tabby tom

Prickleshadow - Speckled brown tom with yellow eyes

Bluepatch - White tom with dark blue-gray dapples and yellow eyes

Breezesong - Black she-cat with pale gray spots and ginger ears and paws

Cloudpath - Gray-and-white tom

Owlsight - Cream she-cat with brown markings

Wrenwing - Brown she-cat with cream dapples and green eyes

Stonegrowl - Pale gray tom with darker markings

Queens: **Ebonyheart** - Pale gray she-cat with a white belly, muzzle and black ears

Elders: **Sootblossom** - Black-and-ginger tom with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader: **Bearstar** - Brown tom with black stripes

Deputy: **Plumbreeze** - Black she-cat with ginger spots

Medicine cat: **Swangaze** - White she-cat with a gray face and silver spots

Warriors: **Birchwhistle** - White tom with a gray-striped tail and gray spots

Shellcoat - Spotted dark gray tom

Elmfall - Brown tabby tom

Falconclaw - Brown tom with a cream belly and paws

Mossripple - Dark brown she-cat with white dapples

Robinswoop - Brown-and-white tom with gray speckles

Lightcloud - Pale brown she-cat with a white belly and muzzle

Mapleheart - Gray-and-brown tabby she-cat

Queens: **Dawnpath** - Ginger she-cat with white spots. Mother to Elmfall's kits: Marshkit, a dark brown tom with a ginger belly, muzzle and paws, and Rosekit, a pale brown-and-ginger she-kit with white paws

Elders: **Violetroar** - Purplish-brown she-cat